
VNHS PROFILE

BILL MERILEES:

Enduring Footprints of a Naturalist

By Margaret Bear

His earliest school report card stated prophetically, "Billy's interest in Science has the whole class enthused." There is no doubt that natural history is still Bill's passion, and his commitment to sharing it with people is equally passionate. It is therefore most fitting that William James Merilees should have been presented with the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal earlier this year for his work in nature education. It is a timely award, coinciding as it does with Bill's FIFTY years of membership with the VNHS.

Bill was nominated for this honour by both the Vancouver Natural History Society and the West Kootenay Naturalists' Association, in tribute to his vast contribution to the field of natural history education. Friends and members have every reason to be grateful for Bill's many years of dedicated "paying it forward" – his phrase for returning in kind the benefits he has received. Bill's expertise, however, has been shared well beyond the borders of British Columbia. It is indeed a daunting task to do justice to someone whose vision is as global as the extent of his travels.

From his parents Bill learned a love of nature. In the dedication to them in his book, *The New Gardening for Wildlife*, Bill speaks appreciatively of the influence in his life of his parents, "who from my earliest recollection, initiated and kindled an interest in doing things for backyard wildlife." The Merilees family did not have to travel far to enjoy that wildlife because in those days Kerrisdale was virtually a wilderness. Their backyard was the great outdoors and the Fraser River nearby provided a natural history laboratory. Marine biology has always been of special

interest to Bill and his particular fascination with clams and snails started early. He remembers the snail that escaped from his pocket at school, only to be found finally in the library, having chewed a hole through a book about – what else? – snails. (I am assured this is not just another of Bill's tall stories.) To this day, the marine mollusc fauna of coastal B.C. continues to be one of his main areas of interest.

Together with his father, Bill enjoyed hiking and camping, in the course of which he learned a lot about trees and an appreciation for conservation. His father, a secondary school teacher, taught woodwork and was an expert cabinetmaker. Together they worked on projects starting with birdhouses for, as Bill says, "I cut my teeth on birds." Later, while at the University of British Columbia, Bill co-ordinated the Pacific Nest Record Scheme, formerly the B.C. Nest Record Scheme. His participation in the scheme began in 1956 and has continued ever since. No doubt this early hands-on experience with his father is what led work colleagues from Castlegar to describe Bill as a "fearless builder." Bill thinks nothing of doing his own major house extensions, renovations, and nature-attracting landscaping projects, most of which inevitably involve pouring concrete. In fact, Kelly Sekhon, on introducing Bill to the Birding Section of the VNHS one evening, stated that "when he is not leading nature tours all over the world, Bill loves to pour concrete and split firewood."

Bill joined the Boy Scouts first as a Cub, then as a Scout and finally as a Rover. This was to become a significant phase in

Bill's life. In 1953 Bill earned his Naturalist badge from Allan R. Wootton, (Scout leader and VNHS President from 1955-1957.) His prize was an Honorary Associate membership in the VNHS, there being no Junior Section then. This creative investment during his youth was to reap many benefits over the course of time. Later, Bill like his father before him was also to become a Scout leader.

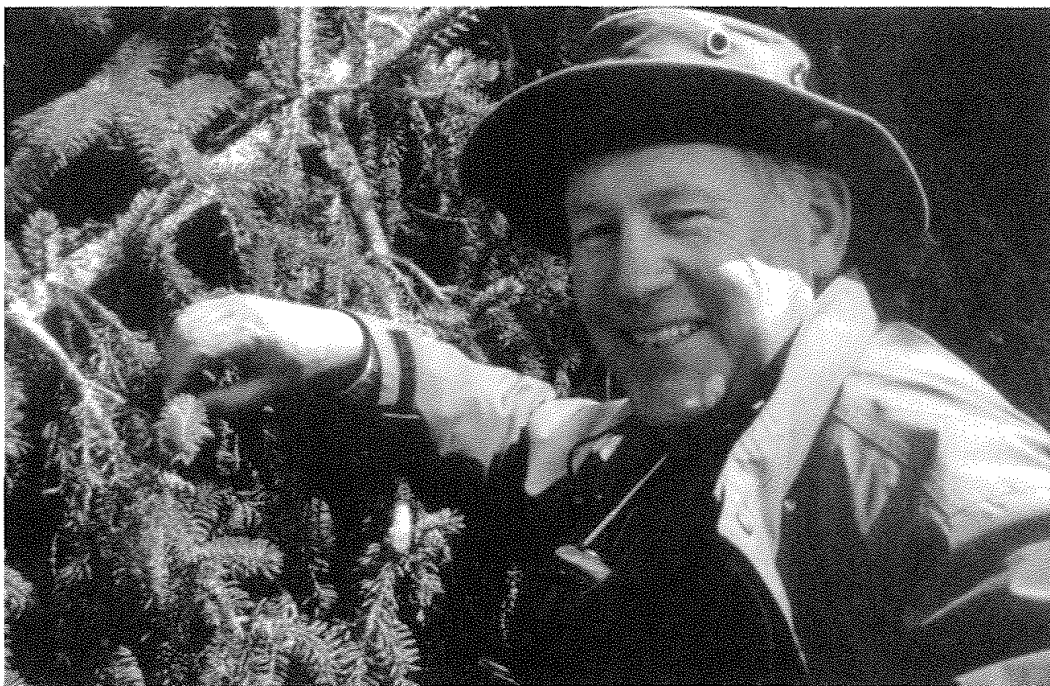
A fortuitous encounter for Bill was his meeting with William Marsden Hughes, also a member of the VNHS, birder and self-trained naturalist. Of the various people who have influenced the course of his life, Bill M. regards Bill Hughes not only as a friend, but among his foremost mentors.

This connection led to some volunteering with Dr. Carl Borden, a professor of German, whose great love was anthropology, and whose favourite occupation was digging archaeological sites. Bill helped at various sites including the Marpole midden. It is not recorded whether this experience later helped Bill get a job with the famous Dr. Louis Leakey in the Rift Valley in Kenya. Dr. Leakey, who was not allowed to hire any

non-African-born staff, nevertheless made it possible for Bill to assist with a project on the osteology of monkeys, with room and board provided, plus six shillings a day.

In 1964 Bill graduated from UBC with a B.Sc. in Zoology and Botany. Afterwards, he went travelling for nineteen months with three other friends. He bought a one-way ticket to Sydney, Australia, disembarking wherever the ship docked, and staying until the next ship arrived. In the course of all this "shore leave" he and his buddies took whatever work they could find to make ends meet: coal miner, wharfie and fisherman—all were tried and tested. This trip was to change the course of Bill's life for two major reasons. One was that he met his future wife June on the outward-bound journey. She was returning home to Australia after a teaching stint abroad; their wedding took place four years later in 1968.

The other was that while in Australia, Bill had an introduction to the Wildlife Unit of the Commonwealth Scientific Industrial Research Organisation, a gathering of eminent biologists in the natural sciences. There he met Dr. Robert Carrick who was



Bill Merilees showing two male pollen cones and a new female seed cone on a Sitka spruce, Queen Charlotte Islands. Photo by Joyce Manary.

the Chief Biologist of the Australian Antarctic Program. Dr. Carrick offered Bill a three-year position as a field biologist in Antarctica, from 1966 to 1968. For someone already fascinated with marine biology, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. For thirteen months of those three years, Bill was stationed on Macquarrie Island, doing research focussed mainly on the Wandering Albatross, Royal Penguin and the elephant seal.

Bill was recently awarded the Australian Antarctic Medallion for his contribution to Australia's research program. The lapse of over thirty years may have been to allow time for the authorities to recover from the shock of Bill's paint job to the exterior of his living quarters in Antarctica. He used a shocking pink, because "there was only red and white paint available." While the Antarctic has obviously left its mark on Bill, we also know he left his mark on it.

In 1968, Bill accepted a teaching position at Selkirk Regional College in Castlegar. Immediately, he initiated the West Kootenay Bird Study and co-ordinated it until 1976. Some of the data were included in the Birds of B.C. project, later *The Birds of British Columbia*. The interest was such that he offered a course in natural history to which one hundred and five people subscribed. An old friend, Muriel Walton, recalls that children considered it a privilege to go bird banding with Bill, and that he was much sought-after for field trips. Bill's high ideals sparked the local naturalists to such an extent that they started the West Kootenay Naturalists' Association in 1972 and Bill served as President for a number of years.

During those Castlegar years, he and June were a thoroughly community-oriented couple, and it was there that their three sons were born. Among his various activities, Bill became interested in preserving the rich history of the Doukhobors, Russian pacifists who had settled in the valley at the turn of the

century. He was part of the group of local community leaders who started the Doukhobor Historical Society in the early 1970s, and he became its first President. According to Elmer Verigin, who was also involved in the venture, they started with no money, no plans and no property, and reaction in general was more hysterical than historical. Undaunted, Bill successfully managed to get the Crown to release a fourteen-acre site for a model Doukhobor Village, based on detailed specifications of an original village in Glade, B.C. The 1971 Centennial was a good time to get government funding, and Bill successfully persuaded the municipalities of Castlegar and Kinnard to select the building of an early Doukhobor communal home—the start of the village—as their joint Centennial project. He also obtained \$100,000 towards the construction of an Exhibition Centre for the Arts, built on the same fourteen-acre site, another project reflecting his skill at facilitating action. It became the home of the Castlegar Museum. His achievement is best summed up by former Castlegar Secondary School principal, John Charters who, speaking of ancient stone footprints, says: "Bill, in his relatively short but productive lifetime, has left an impressive number of more metaphorical but enduring 'footprints' of his own across various places in the world, including the community of Castlegar in the West Kootenays."

But that was not all. He had another dream and successfully petitioned the School Board and Ministry of Forests to establish an educational reserve. With the assistance of Selkirk College faculty and local finances, the Castlegar Outdoor Education Area came into being, providing opportunities for environmental studies for local school groups and naturalists. Selkirk College's Wildland Recreation Program has its Centre there and the West Kootenay Naturalists have posted signs identifying

flora and fauna. Together with Mel Deanna, Bill helped develop a trail within this education area, which was later named the Mel Deanna Park Trail. Another enduring "footprint."

Bill was awarded a Rotary International Scholarship and in 1974 he obtained his M.Sc. (Education/Public Relations) at Colorado State University. As a graduate student he was able to integrate his academic studies with his love for field observation.

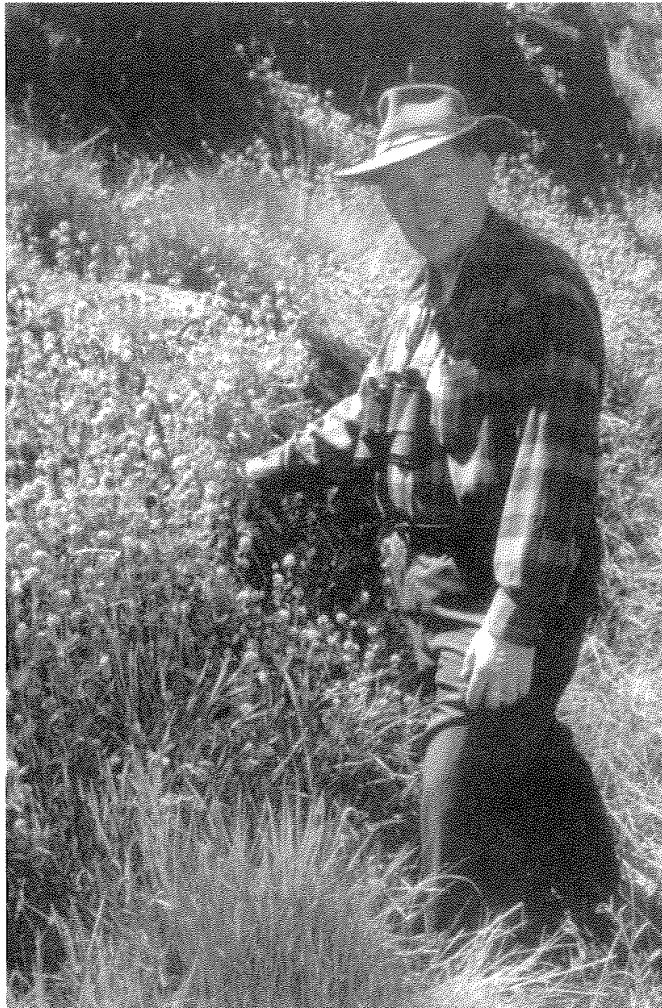
Subsequent employment between 1976 and 1997 was first with Parks Canada for three years and then with Parks BC as an interpretation/visitor services officer until his retirement. It was while working at Waterton Lakes National Park that Bill initiated and organized two summer camps for the Federation of B.C. Naturalists, making good money for the FBCN in the process.

Once Nanaimo became home, Bill not surprisingly became the President of the Nanaimo Field Naturalists, and encouraged the writing of its history. Projects included the Nanaimo River Estuary Bird Study, the compilation of an inventory of breeding songbirds, and chairing the Buttertubs Marsh Committee. Conservation interests find

Bill Chairman of the Friends of the Environment Foundation-Canada Trust, and involved with the Mid Island Wildlife Watch Society, the sponsors of the Brant Festival. Of special significance has been Bill's help and perseverance in the establishment of Jedediah Island Provincial Park.

Work took Bill to Vancouver. Between 1988 and 1990, he was President of the

Vancouver Natural History Society. Val Schaeffer, who served on the Board at the same time, refers to some of the difficulties that the Society seemed to be struggling with in terms of identity and purpose. He states that there was need for change and that Bill was instrumental in giving some new direction. Val fully credits Bill's vision for the new initiatives during that period in the area of publications, field trips and the conserv-



In a patch of Seablush, Mitlenatch Island, June 1996.

ation of wildlife and natural areas through land purchases.

The first of the publications, *The Natural History of Stanley Park*, was produced at the suggestion of Bill to celebrate Stanley Park's 100th anniversary in 1988. Subsequent publications undertaken were all part of the initial plan, with much guidance from Bill, other Board members

and committees. These were all authored by the Society, all group efforts with submissions from numerous members that Val Schaeffer co-ordinated and edited, and all done on a volunteer basis. They included *A Bird Watching Guide to the Vancouver Area, B.C.*; the *Discovery Index* and *The Birds of Vancouver* poster. The *Birds of Burrard Inlet* and the *Nature in Vancouver* books, while not part of the initial vision, were published because of opportunities that arose later. Most significantly, all these publications, except the Stanley Park book, were made possible by funds from the Special Projects Fund to which Bill's tours had contributed so much.

In 1990 Bill, together with Kelly Sekhon and Audrey Viken, conceived the idea of a program of educational nature tours which they would lead on a completely volunteer basis. Twelve years later, fifty-four trips had been undertaken ranging from as far south as the Grand Canyon to the Alaska Highway in the north; east to the grasslands of Alberta and Saskatchewan, and west to the Queen Charlotte Islands.

Bill organized and was principal naturalist on almost all these trips. As Audrey Viken says, the emphasis was always on the "doing" rather than the "going." She recalls, "We slid down sand dunes, walked coulees and canyons, trudged dikes, puffed up mountain trails, marvelled at glaciers, watched for grizzly bears, scrambled through barbed wire fences, forded streams, balanced on log foot-bridges, knelt over flowers, studied birds and their nests, all the while trying to understand how everything fitted into the larger scheme." Audrey credits Bill with doing the work of four and reckons that even an eight-person committee will have difficulty replacing him.

Altogether, over eleven hundred people have participated in the VNHS-sponsored Nature Tours. What the

average participant so appreciated was Bill's willingness to share not only his time, but also his vast encyclopaedic knowledge in an interesting way. His expertise was as diverse as the plants, birds, mammals, invertebrates and marine life he talked about. His compensation was purely the enormous satisfaction derived from providing enjoyment to others. Fellow members recall that it was his leadership style, great sense of humour and his gift for drawing everyone in that made the trips such a pleasure. These trips have raised over ONE HUNDRED AND TEN THOUSAND dollars for the Society! For many years forty percent of the profit has been donated for habitat acquisition and preservation to such organisations as the Nature Trust of B.C. and the World Wildlife Fund. Several thousand dollars have also been committed to the purchase of Burns Bog and the Codd Island Wetlands, should negotiations for their purchase be successful.

The remaining sixty percent was designated for the Society's Special Project Fund. Another of Bill's ideas, this fund was designed to seed projects, such as publications, that would generate returns to be repaid to the Fund. Another use of this money has been the more than \$25,000 contributed to the VNHS Endowment Fund. In short, the Society has profited greatly not only from this huge amount of money, but also from the equally huge amount of time so selflessly volunteered by those who made these trips happen. It was all part of Bill's vision and thanks to his sound business sense that he left another enduring footprint—a lasting legacy to his unfailing generosity and true spirit of volunteerism. Justifiably, Bill has a great deal of personal pride and satisfaction in this contribution, though he is always the first to acknowledge the joint efforts of the team.

In addition to VNHS nature tours, Bill has planned and led a number of tours to other parts of the world, on behalf of professional tour organizers. These tours have been to Australia, Borneo, and the Himalayas. He also regularly travels on the cruise ship *World Discoverer* to the Antarctic, as on-board lecturer and biologist.

Bill continues to be a prolific writer. He has written several books, among them *Humpback Whales of Georgia Strait*, *The New Gardening for Wildlife*, an updated edition of *Attracting Backyard Wildlife*, and *Newcastle Island – A Place of Discovery*. With C.P. Lyons, he co-authored the revised edition of *Trees, Flowers and Shrubs to Know in B.C.* He has written extensively on natural history and published articles and photographs in several journals, including a great many for *Discovery*.

For his work Bill has been honoured by the Kootenay Doukhobor Historical Society; the Federation of BC Naturalists (Elton Anderson Award); the Vancouver Natural History Society (The Garibaldi Award for Service in 1994 and the Kaye and Charles Ney Award for Exemplary Service in 1995); and by the City of Nanaimo.

Countless people attest to Bill's insatiable curiosity, phenomenal memory and boundless energy. Everyone speaks of his wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm for sharing and enriching their appreciation of the environment. Most meaningful of all to Bill are the words from a cartoon sent to him by an appreciative friend:

"The joy of a beautiful thing is the happiness sharing it can bring."

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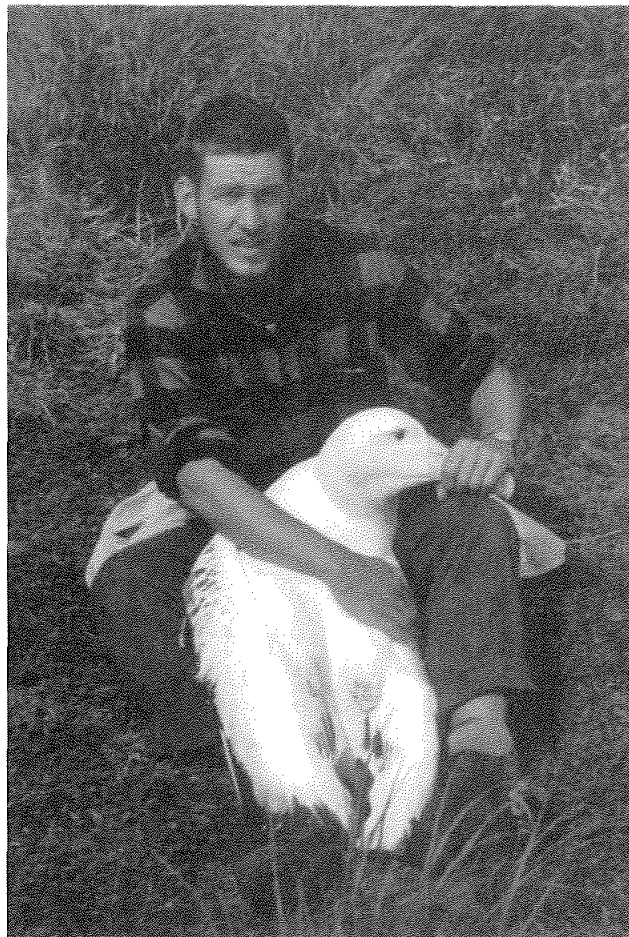
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Acknowledgements:

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Margaret Bear has known Bill for about ten years, and has participated with the greatest pleasure in his trips to Alberta, the Columbia Gorge, Northern Vancouver Island, Bella Coola-Chilcotin, and Newcastle Island.



W.J.M. and Wandering Albatross, Macquarie Island, January 1967