

IN MEMORIAM:
William W. Watson, 1943-2015

Willie D'Anna

William W. Watson passed away on March 18, 2015, a day after turning 72 years old. Bill was born in Buffalo and he spent almost his entire life living in Western New York. He was a geologist, science teacher, conservationist, and birder. He was elected to the City of Tonawanda board of education for six consecutive terms where he was an ardent advocate for the students. Bill was well known in the birding community of Western New York and the entire state. He was also extremely well-liked with his ready laugh, diligent record-keeping, and regular participation in numerous bird counts, surveys, and activities of the Buffalo Ornithological Society (BOS).

Bill's education included a bachelor's degree in history from Baldwin Wallace University in Ohio in 1965 and a master's degree in geology from SUNY at Buffalo in 1970. He taught science in the Buffalo school district from 1970 to 1996. Shortly after completing his formal education, he married Dorothy in 1971. As Dorothy wrote after Bill's death, they were best friends and soul mates. Although Dorothy was not a birder herself, she traveled with Bill when he did some of his county listing and occasionally would accompany him on a local birding foray.

Betsy Potter and I were with a couple of other birders at LaSalle Park in Buffalo at the end of Lake Erie when a man carrying a huge Celestron astronomy telescope on a tripod walked up. It was 1985 or -86 and this was the first time we met Bill Watson. He wanted to know if we had seen the Parasitic Jaeger that was reported on the Buffalo rare bird alert a few days prior. We told him that we had not but that we had seen some interesting birds. Although I do not recall what birds they were, Bill was interested so we helped him look for them. Bill struggled with his massive scope but eventually he managed to find something of interest. While we had been quietly snickering at his bulky optics, since we had our much more portable scopes, we all were still very eager to look through his. Bill's scope was to be one of his trademarks for several years and he continued to use it even after it had been dropped and the lens cracked. Eventually he upgraded to a used Swarovski scope, which he used with the tripod handle pointing away so that he would be less likely to accidentally move the scope. This was certainly different and it became another of Bill's trademarks.

A few months after meeting Bill, we rode together on a BOS field trip. He was carrying a composition notebook, the kind you would see being used by a high school student. In it, he recorded every species we encountered and its location and for birds that were noteworthy, he wrote down the number observed. These notebooks, of which Bill filled many, became another one of his trademarks. Bill took a scientific approach to birding and for some years he

insisted on seeing the “Peterson field marks” before he would write it down in his notebook. This would slow us down, of course, as I tried to get Bill to see the bird again so that neither he nor anyone else would question our identification. Bill could see the value of using things like shape, behavior, and call notes to identify birds quickly but it was a long time before he considered these to be scientifically valid.

When it came to rare birds, Bill did not display much overt joy at seeing one. It seemed to be just another entry in his notebook, alongside the Mallards and Ring-billed Gulls. At least that was my initial impression. It seemed like every time I urged Bill to go see some rarity with me, he would give some reason why he could not go, and it just seemed like it was not very important to him. However, he would usually still wind up going! After taking an early retirement in 1996, Bill went from being an active birder to being very active. Eventually, he caught the New York county listing bug, recording lists in every county and over 100 species in every *Kingbird* region. His total of 297 species is the biggest list in Erie County.

Bill was an assiduous documenter of rare birds. The BOS developed the “Verification Date Guide” which gives dates when a species requires documentation in order to be accepted into the official body of records. Until recent years, the Date Guide was very conservative, such that an active birder like Bill might have been required to document a dozen or more records in a month. Whereas most of us aspired to “write-up” some of the rarities we saw, Bill seemed to never miss an opportunity. His determination to document as many rarities as possible extended to the state level as well. Although Bill discovered a number of rarities which he documented, he also wrote up practically everything he chased. The New York State Avian Records Committee (NYSARC) often has to make pointed requests for documentation of rare birds, so Bill’s meticulous reports were gratefully received by NYSARC. Angus Wilson, the chair of NYSARC wrote the following:

I can add that Bill Watson was a prolific contributor to the New York State Avian Records Committee. Every year we received a stack of carefully written reports from 'WW' describing the reviewable rarities that he had either found himself or had chased. The vast majority of his submissions were of course accepted after Committee review but never once did he grumble to us about the few that weren't. To take just one recent example, his report on the 2014 Jefferson County ptarmigan, which is currently in review, was exemplary in its observation and detail, even down to the 'milky grayish white' toenails. His pleasure in seeing and studying this spectacular rarity is rendered vividly in his description and his thoughtful justification for its identification as a Willow rather than Rock Ptarmigan.

Bill will be remembered as a wonderful role model to us all as birders. He was a diligent and enthusiastic observer, clearly a good field companion to many, and a significant contributor to the permanent ornithological record for

western and central New York State. We at NYSARC will most definitely miss hearing from him.

Bill was determined to make contributions to ornithology in other ways as well. He lived near a nesting colony of Great Blue Herons and Black-crowned Night-Herons that was on Motor Island in the Niagara River. Great Egrets eventually joined the colony and Bill made detailed studies of the egrets and Great Blue Herons. Bill had several of his papers published in “The Prothonotary”, the newsletter of the BOS, as well as *The Kingbird*. Bill did not own or have use of a boat so his studies of these birds were conducted from the mainland with a scope, nearly a half-mile away! Coincident with the regional population increase of Great Egrets was the increase, to a much larger degree, of Double-crested Cormorants. The cormorant population exploded and islands on the Niagara River were rapidly being colonized by this species. The guano from their dense numbers would eventually kill the trees that they nested in. Although this had little effect upon the cormorants, the herons and egrets would no longer nest in the dead trees. When the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) began shooting cormorants to keep the colonies viable for the herons and egrets, one would have thought that Bill would have been all for it. But instead, he was totally against it. Thereafter, his reports to the regional and statewide birding email lists never simply reported the number of cormorants. He now reported the number of “*beautiful* Double-crested Cormorants.”

Andy Mason, the chair of the New York State Ornithological Association’s (NYSOA) conservation committee, wrote the following:

Bill was a fine conservationist also. He loved cormorants—one of a small minority—and worked with NYSOA in our attempts to curtail NYSDEC’s heavy-handed management of these birds in the Niagara region and elsewhere. Bill participated in a meeting with NYSDEC officials a few years ago, and his well-documented observations and records of cormorants on the Niagara River impressed and were respected by all involved.

Bill was a leader, though not in the obvious ways that many leaders are. While he performed many functions for the BOS and NYSOA, such as program chair, field trip chair, newsletter author, council and board member, it was more in the less obvious things he did that made him a leader. In the 1990s there was a push within the BOS to get more people involved with their bird counts. It was not long before Bill had a large contingent of helpers working the territory he was responsible for. Holly Sweeny was a regular helper who often worked the count with Bill. She recalls one time near the end of a long count day that Bill insisted that they had to go to Royalton Ravine to try for Barred Owl. Holly stayed in the car while Bill went into the park. After a very long time passed, Holly began to worry about Bill and went out into the dark looking for him. Eventually she

heard him yelling for her but it was not to show her a Barred Owl. It was because he had gotten lost! Bill's sections remained some of the best and most consistently covered right up until the time he was taken ill. Bill got people involved with birding outside of the counts as well. He would often take younger birders out and show them some of the best birding spots as well as some great birds. Many have gone on to become outstanding birders.

Brendan Klick, who was raised in Buffalo and cut his teeth as a birder here, was one of those that Bill took under his wing. Brendan wrote:

One of my fondest memories of birding in the BOS region occurred probably about 15 years ago. Bill and I were at Rock Point Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada in August. Bill called out an early Orange-crowned Warbler which I didn't get on. However, we went to Poth Road Turf Farms where we ran into Willie D'Anna and Betsy Potter, who had also seen the Orange-crowned Warbler! We also met Peter Yoerg there, who had seen a Buff-breasted Sandpiper in Fort Erie. Willie, Betsy, Bill and I rushed over to Fort Erie where we all had nice views of the sandpiper!

From Malaysia, Steve Brenner wrote the following:

I just wanted to pass along how Bill was the first person I really birded with from Buffalo and was super helpful and kind to me every time I went out with him. I had just gotten out of school and moved back to the area and did my first CBC in Buffalo with him. I was still pretty fresh and didn't know much about birds in the region, but Bill made the count a great day. I will always remember his devotion to the waterfowl and his signature laugh, which was such a great calling card running into him out birding. He will be missed.

It was not just the youth that became inspired by Bill. Celeste Morien had been a long-time birder who became much more active locally a few years before her retirement. She sent the following:

I will always fondly remember Bill Watson. One of the first times I birded with him, I learned of our mutual respect for Great Egrets. I joined Bill and Jim Pawlicki at Tonawanda State Wildlife Management Area (WMA) to count Great Egrets as they came to roost. I was amazed that Bill could read the tiny numbers on the old red leg bands with his Celestron telescope. Bill was practically giddy at finding numbers that he could report to Chip Weseloh, who headed up the Great Egret banding program in Canada, where most of the banded birds that we saw were from. I caught the egret fever from Bill and met him to escort Chip on Chip's first visit through the myriad swamp locations for egret roosts at Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge and the Tonawanda WMA. On a later occasion, I was able to show Chip the Oak Orchard WMA locations, attempting to be as thorough as Bill. When it was suspected that Great Egrets were nesting

on the Iroquois Refuge, and I mentioned to Bill that the refuge staff had just documented the first nesting, Bill smiled sheepishly, laughed in his characteristic way, and admitted that he had confirmed that already. Enough said!

A few years ago, when a White Ibis was found at a nighttime roost on Tonawanda WMA, since Bill knew exactly where to walk in, my husband and I met him in the late afternoon. We saw the ibis without difficulty and counted all the egrets separately. Somehow, Bill was always able to see a few more birds than I had! By the time we left, it was quite dark. Bill led the way out, since he was smart enough to bring a flashlight. After picking our way back to the parked cars in the pitch black with the aid of Bill's flashlight, through many muskrat and turtle holes in the dike, a DEC officer greeted us. Bill took the lead and explained that we weren't illegally frog hunting, which is what the officer thought. We shared a good laugh about the experience!

Bill cared deeply about all birds, but in addition to the egrets, cormorants, night-herons and raptors on the Niagara River, he was also involved with Cliff Swallows and their protection in his own neighborhood of Tonawanda, NY. On one occasion, I birded with Bill along the upper Niagara River. Bill wanted me to know about the Thompson Street Bridge connecting River Road to Tonawanda Island. He was very concerned about the welfare of the Cliff Swallows nesting under this bridge. He told me that Smith Boys, the boat people on the island, knocked down the nests whenever they wanted. He got involved and at some point got into a verbal altercation with them because I believe he reported their actions to the DEC. He didn't want to park in their lot because they had said if they saw him, they would charge him with trespassing. As a result we had to walk a ways to view the nests from the opposite side of their parking lot. I think it is safe to say that no one had more data or was more informed about the avian life in this stretch of the Niagara River.

For many years, Bill participated in the Oak Orchard Christmas Count for which I am the compiler, among other counts he was loyal to. A few years ago, he told me he wanted to let his area go, so that the younger birders would have a chance to participate. But when I was in a pinch over an area last December, Bill filled in willingly, meeting me in his little red car at 7:15 AM to pick up the paperwork.

Bill will be sorely missed by this birder and certainly by everyone in the birding community who knew him.

Nadine Litwin succinctly wrote about Bill and in so doing expressed the feelings of many who knew him:

I was lucky enough to have done Christmas Bird Counts (Canadian side) with Bill ... he was kind, inclusive, funny, and I will miss him terribly.

Matt Young, who knew Bill mainly through Bill's wanderings for county birds, wrote the following:

The loss of Bill and Jerry Lazarczyk in the last 8 months hurts. My favorite story about the two was back around 2003 when I first started finding Red Crossbills regularly in areas of Chenango County... it was July/August, they met me out in the middle of nowhere in East Pharsalia. We drove around for a few hours and found nothing, came back to one of the first spots, a white spruce plantation, and there we found parents feeding young with uncrossed bills. The white spruce were maybe only 25-35 feet tall...birds were ridiculously cooperative...Jerry pulled out two lawn chairs from the back of his truck and Bill and Jerry proceeded to watch them for a good 45 minutes while sitting in the lawn chairs. It was a fun, cool, successful and funny adventure.

Long-time Kingbird Region One editor and BOS member, Mike Morgante, had a lot to say about Bill but boiled it down to this summary and anecdote:

There is so much to be said about Bill's many contributions to the BOS, but first and foremost, I remember him as a dedicated birder. He went birding frequently, and whether he was on his own or with others, he always kept a list of species and counts. His sightings were submitted to BOS each month with pencil on paper. He never missed a month and I'd be amazed at the numbers of dates he was out birding as much as the many sightings he contributed each month. Bill organized field trips for BOS for many years and he enjoyed attending them also. I recall leading a trip at Tifft Nature Preserve in early May sometime in the 1990s. I was a little frustrated in not being able to find for the group a Northern Waterthrush that was singing in the thick brush and puddles along Warbler Walk. As I moved the group along I said something to the effect that it wasn't unusual for Northern Waterthrush in that many more of them are identified by hearing their song rather than actually seeing them. Bill quickly chimed in that my statement was only correct for birders who knew the song of the waterthrush. While this was more of a smart aleck comment than anything, he was also correct, and the group had a smile. I remember Bill each time I hear a waterthrush in that same spot at Tifft, which is almost every spring.

In the last few months while working on a research project, I have had many occasions to look up bird records in the BOS Noteworthy Records Database. Bill Watson's name keeps coming up over and over again. His contributions to the database are enormous. In only thirty years Bill had far and away the most records in the database. His sightings have proved invaluable to my research.

When Betsy Potter and I moved from Wheatfield, just outside of Niagara Falls, up to Lake Ontario in 2004, we rarely went on birding trips with Bill anymore. However, we would sometimes ride with him on BOS field trips. As the BOS field trip chair, Bill felt somewhat obligated to attend. As an occasional

leader I was grateful for Bill's attendance as he would shoulder the responsibility for counting the birds and he frequently found birds that the group wanted to see.

The last chase trip I went on with Bill was in March 2007. Jim Pawlicki went with us. It was a great trip as we got all of our targets and then some—Slaty-backed Gull in Sullivan County, Bullock's Oriole in Ulster County, and Western Tanager and Smith's Longspur on Long Island. On the way downstate Jim was driving and he suddenly pulled onto the narrow shoulder of the Interstate Route 390, yelling "Sandhill Crane!" With huge tractor trailer trucks whizzing by just inches away at 70 mph, Bill and I hurriedly looked from the car for the crane. Just as we spotted the crane and I was thinking, "Good, we can finally get out of here!" Jim found a male Mallard-Northern Pintail hybrid, a form that we had never seen before! Of course, we had to look at that too—all the while I was sweating bullets!

This occasion reminded me of another chase that Betsy and I went on with Bill in November 1987. We were on our way to an area near the Montezuma NWR for a Gray Kingbird when Bill suddenly pulled over onto the shoulder of the New York State Thruway and proceeded to back up! There, only six feet away from us, was a Cattle Egret! And yes, we got the kingbird, too.

Bill was a very active birder up until the time he was taken ill. In his last ten years few people birded with him more than Jim Pawlicki. When Jim first started birding with Bill he was still a beginner, but by the later years, Jim described their birding as "complementary". Bill would take on the more tedious task of counting and keeping track of numbers, while Jim would usually focus more on combing through flocks for rare or uncommon species. Despite the large age difference, they were a great team, turning up numerous rarities for other birders to chase. Jim has shared many fond memories of Bill and had some insightful comments about his personality as well. Jim says that Bill was the most non-judgmental person he has ever met. Unlike most birders, who tend to make judgments of the skill, honesty, and reliability of other birders, Bill pondered the reasons why people acted the way they did. More than anything else, however, he focused on the reliability of his own observations. Jim also describes Bill as one of the most stubborn persons he has ever met. While he found this frustrating at times, he understood that this was who Bill was and what helped make him a great person and contributor to ornithology and conservation. Bill was not going to let the little things stop him from achieving his goals. If he had to lug a 20 pound astronomy scope into the field to read leg bands or watch the herons and egrets from a half-mile away to observe their behavior, to him that was just part of the job.

Bill's passing was relatively sudden. He was in the hospital for only a couple of weeks before the sepsis infection that ravaged his body could no longer be held off. Prior to that, he had been just as active as always. We birded with him on a BOS field trip led by Jim Pawlicki in January. Sudden passings can be a blessing to the person who is leaving this world, limiting the length of

time that they have to suffer. For those who care for them, however, there may not be enough time to fully accept that your friend will no longer be there counting the cormorants, herons, egrets, and eagles at the places you ran into him so many times before. Although we knew Bill was seriously ill, Betsy and I were shocked by his death. We felt certain that his stubborn personality would pull him through and that we would be with him in the field again or reading about his future sightings in the BOS Noteworthy Records or *The Kingbird* Region 1 report. Our sadness will not be relieved quickly but time heals all and eventually we will be left only with the many memories of Bill that made us smile, laugh, or shake our heads in admiration. Bill's many consistent contributions to birding and to ornithology leave a lasting legacy that other birders can strive for. And in one more way, Bill is leading by example.

