

by C.H.D. Clarke



NON-CIRCULATING

I have not been in Banff since 1944, but there was a day when the management of its wildlife, fishes, in fact nature generally, were subject to my advice and recommendations. I got to know the whole area much better than the Superintendent. The time span since I left is greater than that between the original passage of the National Parks Act and my departure, and I know that many changes, particularly in public use and pressure, have taken place since. Scientific study and nature interpretation are both now flourishing. Occasionally scraps of information about these things come my way. By mere chance I happened to see a publication that indicated that the writer was curious about some old interpretive labels that apparently still survive. Obviously some things I know are not on record.

Banff Park was originally set up as a few acres of reserve around the Hot Springs, and became a little square, mostly town and flat land. I think it likely that when the C.P.R. was built somebody saw commercial possibilities in the springs and tried to get private title. This is certainly what happened at the Liard Hot Springs during Alaska Highway construction. The B.C. Government promptly slapped a reserve on them, and so must the Dominion Government have done in Banff at an earlier date. It is a commentary on our Canadian ideals and ethics that whereas Yellowstone was set up so that nobody should ever mar or exploit the various thermal springs, Banff was set up so that only the Government and the C.P.R. should mar and exploit.

The original acreage contained a town and a leasehold system from the beginning. There were also some private lots. Some may still be private, for all I know. For example, on one of them, in my time, the Sun Greenhouse Company provided essential greenery to Banff grocers, but it was a bit of an eyesore. Banff also soon acquired a zoo, hardly natural. A wealthy Torontonionian, Mr. Blackstock, of the Gooderham distillery connection, had once hunted buffalo, and was very active in the move to prevent its extermination. Some wild calves had been salvaged, and he bought some from Buffalo Jones in Kansas. These together formed the nucleus of a herd at the Stony Mountain penitentiary. They, or most of them, including the famous wild-caught bull, Sir Donald, were moved to an enclosure at Banff. Other animals were soon added.

At a very early date a Mr. Witcher, a self-styled naturalist, as the annual reports show, got himself assigned to report on the park wildlife. He reported things like antelope which future naturalists hesitated to enter into the canonical list of the Park fauna. In fact, because of his obvious shortcomings, his records are all rejected. However, he did make one recommendation stick. He visited the small lakes on the flats and recommended that wild rice be introduced from the east. It was done. Most such plantings fail, and this, I believe, was no exception, nor was it the only planting of wild rice.

Thus we have a glorious start for a natural park - natural wonders marred and exploited, a town built, a zoo, and an introduction of exotics. In the latter case, hatchery fish soon followed. If there are any native cut-throat left you can call it a miracle. Canada is a wonderful place.

However, a major contribution to the knowledge of the park flora and fauna was made in those early days. Prof. (as he liked to be called) John Macoun, of the Geological Survey Museum in Ottawa, came for a summer. Mr. Macoun was one of the best botanists and botanical collectors that ever walked our hills. He did not know vertebrate animals any better than most botanists, but he was always accompanied by his zoological preparator, William Spreadborough, who, though uneducated, did know birds and mammals very well. The cold-blooded things, I should add, got little attention.

Mr. Macoun wrote a "Catalogue of Canadian Birds", and from it you can compile a Banff list. It is obvious to anyone who knows Banff birds that the Banff records are based on Mr. Spreadborough's collections, and Mr. Macoun's comments are those of a man who did not recognize most of the birds around him on his botanical excursions. He, however, dominated the biological part of the Geological Survey, and like a real prima donna, could not tolerate another diva in the caste. His chief, Dawson, knew that certain branches of science in the Museum were weak, and one day, when Macoun was away from Ottawa on an extended trip, had Montague Chamberlain, the only available competent Canadian, appointed as ornithologist under Macoun. When Macoun got home he went straight to Sir John A. Macdonald without even sleeping on it, and Chamberlain left at once for an academic job in the U.S.A.. Anyway, we do have Spreadborough's work.

Then came the big change, Canada decided to have parks like the U.S., and a parks act like the U.S.. It was primed partly by the saving of the buffalo, when the Pablo herd was brought to Wainwright, a fine thing that ended in disaster caused by blind and ignorant preservationism. That is another story. Under the new act a whole chain of mountain parks was set up. The new Banff was even bigger than now. There was a vigorous and peppery director - an ex-newspaperman, J.B. Harkin, not too knowledgeable, but high on principle, which was sorely needed.

Among other things came a museum. Banff Museum was built like the publicity-propaganda section of a C.P.R. station, complete with sheaves of wheat. When I said this in a comment on the Museum when I was in the federal service, Bob Stead, the Canadian novelist, who was then head of publicity in parks, had a good laugh, because, he told me, he, as a publicity man with the C.P.R., had contributed those exhibits, on request. It was a dreadful place. If it still serves its old function, I withdraw any remarks I may have made about progress. Intense sunlight streamed in, irreplaceable exhibits bleached out of recognition, and though perhaps thieves did not break in and steal, moths and rust corrupted.

The best part of the Museum was a collection of Blackfoot material from Gleichen, on long-term loan from Canon Gibben-Stockton, who had been a popular missionary at the time when the old Indians who had lived their whole lives in prairie warfare and buffalo hunting were dying off. The Blackfoot, unlike the Stonies, were not allowed by tradition to use the bonnets, medicine bundles and other gear of dead men. They had to earn their own. The Canon collected this priceless stuff as the owners died and it was being thrown away. The Stonies, by contrast, treasure their fathers' gear. I remember Johnny Bear Paw, wearing the war bonnet of his father, who signed the Blackfoot Crossing treaty for his people,

at the bridge at Banff one Indian Day in the depression, refusing \$1200 from an American who wanted it. There were also in the Museum assorted stuffed creatures and trophies from here and there, and Ottawa contributed many specimens. A very few were from Spreadborough's Banff collection, but most were not. In fact, most of the Museum was irrelevant to Banff-musk-oxen, for example. I sincerely hope the Canon's collection has found a suitable home somewhere.

The Museum also had a Curator who tried to keep the stuff in order, and added Banff material. This was Mr. N.B. Sanson, a man who had done all sorts of civic and C.P.R. chores around town in early days, and was a tolerable naturalist. Among other things he climbed Sulphur Mountain regularly all his life, rain, snow, wind and cold notwithstanding, for the daily reading of the weather instruments, commencing when they were first put in place. When I knew him he was in his eighties, but still climbing. There was no cable lift then. I do not know when he was supposed to have retired. He came regularly to the Museum after his climb, and never left Banff. If he did not climb, who would? It is great to have a mission in life.

Surely it was Sanson who put out the first interpretive labels and notices around town in 1915. Dr. Harlan I. Smith, of the National Museum, came out and prepared a catalogue of all the exhibits, which was published. He was an ethnologist. He used Sanson's records. N.B. Sanson was not very articulate, and to my knowledge never wrote any official publications, through he was quoted regularly in the "Crag and Canyon". Smith was not acceptable to local characters such as Sanson, Norman Luxton, Jim Simpson, and the famous eccentric park warden Bill Peyto, because he tried to change things around. Bill collected things - archaeological material, fossils - some of which were in the Museum, but he was a secretive man, a little bit touched, as we used to say, and never told exactly where he found them. I am prepared to bet that most were close to his old cabins, if anyone knows where they were. I saw a couple hidden in the bush. A psychiatrist would have found them interesting. Once he broke out a slab, with half a Devonian fish, the mirror image remaining in situ. The geologists were excited, and one came all the way from Ottawa. At the Park H.Q., after the scientist had been installed in his hotel, he met everyone, and then, as it was told to me, said in a rather condescending academic voice "Well, Peyto, tomorrow we shall go to the Devonian fish!". "We will like hell!" said Bill, and left town forthwith. All the learned man could do was go back to Ottawa.

Smith would have done better. He put up labels on natural objects in various places. Some were still up in my time. Most were botanical. Botanists were a dime a dozen around Banff, and the famous botanist Mary Vaux Walcott, who wrote about mountain plants, was a regular visitor. Today we have A.E. Porsild's "Mountain Flora", the best plant guide for a park system anywhere. Among other things, Smith, being an ethnologist, put a sign up at the two and a fraction Salish house pits, sad remnants of a valuable archaeological site that was largely destroyed when the C.P.R. built their golf course. Add eyesore hotels, a golf course, and a destroyed archaeological site to our Canadian cultural score.

There were some misgivings about Smith's birds, however, and Mr. J.A. Munro, the federal Migratory Birds Officer, spent some time in Banff, and listed in a report all the Museum birds and mammals with data. Sanson's successor, when I went first to Banff, was a garrulous man named Brown, with a suspiciously purple nose. I never saw him do

anything in the Museum except give out a lot of pure bilge about nature. A group of obvious city folk from Britain lapped it up, while bystanders from Calgary maintained a not-too-polite silence.

Brown died not long after, and was succeeded in the Museum by the staff taxidermist, Mr. Mitchell, who had been there during the visit of Mr. Munro. He mounted a few birds, but, inspired by Mr. Munro, spent most of his time salvaging as study skins the birds that almost daily got killed by smashing into the glass at the Cave and Basin, a death trap. He was around as long as I was. On one occasion the Auditor General, no less, took note of the fact that Mr. Mitchell was paying a dollar a year for a taxidermist licence under the Migratory Birds Regulations, which, being an employee, he should not have been required to pay. The Chief Federal Migratory Birds Officer, Mr. Hoyes Lloyd, wrote back that he would defer further issue until Dr. Clarke, your servant, who was going to Banff soon, talked to Mr. Mitchell and reported. Like many taxidermists Mr. Mitchell was a quiet, rather inarticulate, not too well educated man, who had lived his life in a sheltered world of arsenic and old feathers. When I entered his room - by this time Mr. Brown had gone and he was the only one on staff - I said the usual things, and then pointed to the framed licence, and asked why, being an employee, he paid a dollar for something he did not need. He registered deep alarm at once, and I realized that he looked on the licence as visible proof that he really was a taxidermist, to be pointed out to anyone who dared question. I wrote to Ottawa, described the circumstances, and suggested that if it was a valued prop to Mr. Mitchell's ego to be allowed to contribute a dollar a year to the Consolidated Revenue of Canada for this licence, he should be permitted to do so. This was duly relayed to the Auditor General's office and approved. This will tell you something about Mr. Mitchell, and something about the Auditor General as well. Bruce Mitchell, then Chief Park Warden, was unrelated.

It must have broken Harlan Smith's ethnological heart to be unable to do anything about the Gibben-Stockton collection. I still wonder what happened to it. I wrote in my report that it was deteriorating, should be salvaged, and had no business being in Banff. Sanson would not have agreed with this. I suspect that he would not even have wanted to junk the sheaves of wheat from the C.P.R. publicity material.

When I was preparing a faunal list, I, in my turn, went through the collection. Between Jim Munro's list and Smith's book I could account for everything. I would like to have junked the irrelevant birds, collected all over Canada, which came from the National Museum as unwanted duplicates from their collection, but I could not. At least I got the Banff records straight on paper. All I had to do was identify the specimens prepared by Mitchell between Jim Munro's visit and mine.

I did a lot of field work in Banff park, but little interpretation, other than talking to tourists encountered by chance. Once I was in the Bow Summit cabin, in 1939, near a National Forestry Program camp. Those waifs of the depression were the Canadian equivalent of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the U.S.A.. They were supposed to work part time and be taught the rest, with the result that they never went to bed tired, and spent the night tearing their camp apart. I told the camp boss, who years later was a district administrator in my Department in Ontario, that if he would give them to me for their next study period, I would guarantee him a night's rest. I took them along the trail that

they were building to the Peyto Lake lookout, and then, looking down at the Glacier, I talked about glaciers and glacier lakes. Away they went down, for personal contact with what they had heard about. Naturally, because I had said it was unnecessary, they had to go all the way to the glacier. We could watch them and monitor them easily with binoculars. Down and up was a good haul, and after filling their hollow legs, they slept that night. I do not know how much geology they absorbed.

During the war I stopped off in Banff on my trips north. Pat Brewster sometimes had a few visiting service lads, whom he asked me to take with me on brief field trips.

Today the fauna, vertebrate and invertebrate, and flora of Banff Park must be as well known as that of any place in Canada. It is pleasant to think that it is being well interpreted. I hope that the interpretation tells the truth about some things that were done to the landscape in the past.

Finally, perhaps the most interesting interpretation ever done in Banff was at the time of the visit of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, now the Queen Mother, in 1939. The king was a competent naturalist. After all, he was an English country squire, and they are generally good naturalists. I was much amused by the reports of the British House of Commons on the introduction, some years ago, by Lady Tweedsmuir of her bill on the protection of birds, which now stands as a model law. It was passed unanimously, but the Honourable Members were given a chance to sound off when it was read. I cannot remember names and constituencies, so possibly I may be permitted to substitute what I consider to be representative names. A Mr. Jones, the fiery Labour member for Cem Brent, in the coal mining district of Wales, went into rapsodies about a peregrine falcon, which he claimed to see every morning on or over the houses of Parliament. Regrettably, no such visitation would ever be accepted as authentic. There was at that time a kestrel to be seen daily, and the obvious misidentification was too much for Col. Blimp, the Conservative member for Upper Ox-wallow, who, with, as one may suppose, the hems and haws natural to the speech of many Col. Blimps, suggested, with all due respect to the Hon. Member, that a peregrine would be something unique and beyond credence, and that, no reflection on the Hon. Member, there might have been a misidentification. The Blimps know their birds. Mr. Jones went into orbit, and Lady Tweedsmuir anxiously intervened, saying that comment was appreciated, but debate appeared needless, and thanked both Hon. Members for their support.

The King was no Col. Blimp, but he was, as I said, an English country squire, with a deep interest in, and knowledge of, natural history. He had precious few chances to indulge his interest on his Canadian trip. However, as those who remember transcontinental travel by train, especially with whistle stops, can bear witness, there is much to be seen, especially on the prairies. The ponds in spring had waterfowl, godwits, gulls and the like. Fence posts had Swainson's hawks. There were always singing western meadowlarks, chestnut-collared longspurs, the occasional western kingbird, ground squirrels (mostly Richardson's), and pocket gopher mounds. The King noticed absolutely everything, and wanted to know specifics, that is, not just a hawk, but what kind of a hawk. To the assembled cabinet ministers, and such journalists as were not taking refreshments inside, he kept saying "What is that?". None of them could tell him anything, and someone unwisely attempted to belittle the importance of such knowledge.

The King turned on them and castigated them, saying that he thought it disgraceful that Canadians in high places knew nothing about the natural history of their country. In fact, as I heard it at second hand, as he sometimes stammered a little when he was angry, he said it was a damned disgrace. I heard that Mr. Mackenzie King, who flattered himself on being something of a botanist, tried to save the day by identifying a plant of world-wide distribution, and got it wrong. The King knew his weeds.

Banff was to be a rest stop. The park Superintendent met the train from Calgary in the morning, and, when he shook hands offered his services to their majesties. The King said he would like to see some wildlife, if it was possible to do so in a short time without too much trouble. The Superintendent said it was, and promptly laid on an afternoon motorcade up the switch-backs of Stoney Squaw Mountain, where there were then, and at that time of year always, deer, elk, and sheep. The Royal party then pulled away to their quarters in the Banff Spring Hotel, where they were to be met later. The Superintendent was then stopped by one of the newsmen who had witnessed the scene on the train across the prairies. This man told what had happened in great detail, and warned that the King would ask questions. I may add that neither he nor any other reported the questions on the train, I suspect that those who were not back in the smoking car did not think the matter worth reporting, nor would they ever have counted natural history newsworthy.

The park Superintendent, Col. P.J. Jennings, was a little bit shaken. Park Warden Ernie Stenton, an excellent naturalist, had been standing at attention throughout, and taking in every detail. Col. Jennings, who respected his knowledge, took him immediately on a trial run over the route. The animals were there, alright, plus things like robins and black-capped chickadees that even the Super knew. Stops were predetermined, and for each one the Superintendent was given a few conspicuous plants to remember. That was not enough, though. It was arranged that, in the afternoon, at each stop Stenton would run down from the stop above and report what was there, and then cut up on foot two switchbacks, then down again, so that the Superintendent would know exactly what to look for at the stop ahead. Thus the royal party were shown not only black-capped chickadees, but also Gambel's, with the difference explained, a very tame Franklin's spruce grouse, and other things, in addition to pulling open a bearberry fruit to see how dry it was, and feeling the prickliness of a lodge-pole pine cone. Finally, the King shook hands with the Superintendent and thanked him heartily, saying what a great pleasure it was to meet at last someone who knew something about natural history. All the while Park Warden Ernie Stenton was standing stiffly at attention close by. He told me every detail that I have recorded here when I arrived the very next day, to commence several months of field work. Ernie later became a fish hatchery manager and achieved some fame as the man who first produced the fish hybrid known as splake.

I suppose I am the only one left who can pass on this story. The King is gone, Jennings is gone and Ernie is gone. So are all the politicians and journalists. Maybe the Queen Mother might remember. As for the damned disgrace, nothing has changed.

- chief mammalogist, N Parks General,

Dec 1943 -

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letter to Stead

(reference from Bank Museum
HSMBC Agenda paper,
Mills + Wright)