

TOM HAWTHORN

Ian McTaggart-Cowan
1910-2010



A scholar and early activist in the cause of wildlife conservation, Ian McTaggart-Cowan informed generations of British Columbians about the natural wonders around them.

He encouraged management of nature's bounty, a somewhat radical approach in a province where pillaging the seas, forests and wildlife once seemed a privilege of residence.

The eminent zoologist produced hundreds of papers, pamphlets and books, yet it was undoubtedly his appearances on the fledgling medium of television that won his message its widest audience.

In 1955, already established as a distinguished figure in academia, the dapper professor hosted a television show called *Fur and Feathers*. Filmed live, it taught children about animals and encouraged them to appreciate nature. He later served as host of two other documentary series for CBC television. *The Living Sea* was shown in British Columbia in 1957 and on the national network in 1962. This was followed by *The Web of Life*, an 11-part series that aired in 1963. These programs were sold to other broadcasters around the globe.

McTaggart-Cowan, who died on Sunday at the age of 99, remained active well into his advanced age. He was a director emeritus of the Nature Trust of British Columbia, a non-profit, non-advocacy group on whose board he sat for more than 30 years.

Born in Edinburgh on June 25, 1910, he immigrated to Canada at age 3 with his family, who settled in North Vancouver. The boy, the eldest of four children, was encouraged by his mother to take note of natural history. At age 12, according to Rod Silver, who profiled McTaggart-Cowan for the Vancouver Natural History Society's *Discovery* magazine six years ago, Ian completed a year-long diary of all birds spotted around his home to fulfill the requirement for a Boy Scout proficiency badge. From this simple beginning emerged a scientist with an encyclopedic knowledge.

He began studies at the University of British Columbia, spending his summers in the field, studying Rocky Mountain fauna in national parks. In 1931, a fruitful spring spent with Kenneth Racey, a naturalist who served as a mentor, resulted in several finds, including the Pacific pallid bat in the southern Okanagan, as well as the rediscovery of the Vancouver Island marmot.

After graduating in 1932, he began work on a doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley. He then joined the staff of the Provincial Museum (now the Royal B.C. Museum) in Victoria as a biologist. After five years, he joined the faculty at UBC as a zoology professor, becoming department head in 1953. He was dean of graduate studies from 1964 until retiring from the university in 1975.

McTaggart-Cowan encouraged the application of scientific methods to wildlife management. He felt British Columbians, as custodians of the richest biota in the land, had a particular responsibility to ensure this "extraordinary diversity of living organisms is passed on to our successors with all options intact."

He had an extensive list of public service contributions, including seven years spent with the National Research Council of Canada, for which he was the first chairman of an advisory

committee on wildlife research. He also sat on the board of governors of the Arctic Institute of North America and sat as chairman of the Canadian Environmental Advisory Council.

Having moved to Vancouver Island in retirement, he began serving a five-year term as chancellor of the University of Victoria at the age of 69 in 1979.

As a zoology professor, he developed a diet, called UBC 14, consisting of alfalfa hay and a mash of corn bran and corn gluten, designed to make deer as efficient meat producers as sheep. The diet, developed with an animal nutritionist, was tested on waifs rescued from forest fires. At one point, he had more than 60 deer sampling his high-protein diets from the safety of campus enclosures.

One of his more exotic television performances included a look at the preservation of wild animals in Africa, produced for CBC-TV's Discovery in 1962. He also appeared in a 1982 film opposing the use of leg-hold traps.

His papers ranged widely, from studies of white-footed mice to definitive looks of the mammals and birds of British Columbia.

He was invested as an officer of the Order of Canada in 1971 for his contributions to zoology and as a conservationist. (His younger brother later joined him in the Order.) He was named to the Order of B.C. in 1991.

His name graces the Cowan Vertebrate Museum on the UBC campus, which boasts 17,000 mammal and 15,200 bird specimens.

In 2005, the provincial government contributed \$500,000 to establish a professorship in his name at UVic's school of environmental studies. The university raised an equal amount to fund the professorship, for which Brian Starzomski was hired last year. As well, a \$25,000 endowed scholarship at the university carries the names of the wildlife biologist and his late wife, Joyce.

On his birthday in 2007, 97 trees – one to mark each of his years – were planted at the Swan Lake Christmas Hill nature sanctuary. Cedars, Douglas fir and black cottonwoods were planted at a site that the conservationist had been instrumental in establishing as a sanctuary. Until its acquisition in 1976, Swan Lake, in Saanich, just north of Victoria, was a dumping ground for raw sewage and wastes from dairy farms and a winery.

The subject of the honour was on hand to encourage the tree planting.

*Tom Hawthorn
Published in the Globe and Mail
on April 21, 2010
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