

## David Gascoigne

### Nomination for the WRN Conservation Award

David Gascoigne is an ardent, active, environmental and conservation enthusiast. His enthusiasm is infectious as demonstrated by his activities at Sprucehaven. He has marshaled both human and physical resources in his efforts to turn Sprucehaven, once a farm into a species rich natural area.

In 2014, while David was President of Waterloo Region Nature, he was contacted by a St Agatha property owner to see if the group would be interested in advising him on how to develop their property to better attract wildlife and perhaps to improve the property to achieve the quality required for it to be designated as an environmental preserve. At the time WRN was unable to agree to this. However David decided to follow-up personally. He met with the owners and explored the property, which, with its large pond, fields, and woods, captivated him.

David started his environmental activism through his passion for birds, a passion that motivated him to travel the globe in search of new species for his life list! While wandering Sprucehaven he discovered a wide variety of birds and identified areas attractive to migrating birds. Up to this point his environmental activism had led him among other things to join WRN and to agree to serve as its President. He had led outings for the club. He served diligently on the Board and assisted in activities in another local environmental preserve (rare). But in guiding the efforts to improve Sprucehaven his knowledge and experience (all self-taught) flowered and expanded.

Being a birder he observed a large colony of barn swallows, a species at risk, in one of the outbuildings. He began in depth observations of the nesting sites identifying every nest, those in use, the numbers of eggs laid, chicks fledged. He contacted the organization which tracks aerial insectivores in North America, searched their resources and especially what they were doing to learn more about swallows.

In his own words from his blog of ----- 2015

" Dave and Sandy have granted me the rare honour of planning an informal survey of their property and have given me the liberty to propose plans and ideas that might benefit the environment and enhance the habitat for wildlife. Already we have concrete plans in place to band the Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* nesting in their old barn, and next spring we will install a bluebird trail in the hope of attracting Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*. We will install the nest boxes in tandem and perhaps will succeed in achieving the nirvana of having bluebirds and Tree Swallows *Tachycineta bicolor* nesting as neighbours.

In two weeks the first Christmas Bird Count will occur on their property and other ideas are already percolating in my head.

It is a very exciting adventure on which I am embarking and the immense good fortune which has befallen me is appreciated beyond words."

The next spring nest boxes went up and monitoring began.  
From David's blog:

"Daina and I checked all our nest boxes and I am happy to report that we have three boxes occupied by Tree Swallows, *Tachycineta bicolor*, two with eggs and one with young. The Eastern Bluebirds *Sialia sialis* appear to have fledged their young from another nest box and from what we can judge are preparing for a second brood."

Other friends were expert bird banders so he invited them in spring and fall to capture and band species at Sprucehaven and everyone was delighted with the number and variety of species identified and over several years they have found bird species that use the Sprucehaven property on their regular migration route. They have identified species that establish their summer home in Sprucehaven.

In 2016 David proposed to the Sprucehaven owner (Dave) that they might radio tag some barn swallows. He also mentioned that if a radio tower were to be erected at Sprucehaven the barn swallows could be tracked on their migration route by connected towers thus joining in the effort to establish migration patterns, adding to the knowledge of these specialty birds. The owner, in spite of the costs involved, agreed. Sprucehaven is now part of the international study of this species.

Several other major projects were begun in this period. David used his contacts at the Environmental Studies Department of the University of Waterloo to see if they would be interested in helping improve the habitat. Students participated in planting trees and shrubs increasing the wildlife corridors on the property. Also students (Ecology Lab.) took over the salamander monitoring, started by David and friends. Special boards had been designed to lay on the ground to provide habitat and living quarters for these tiny creatures. The weekly observations (at the right time of year) are submitted to the Herpetology Atlas website of Ontario Nature to be combined with province wide data.

Not only has David reached out for assistance from local environmental enthusiasts for assistance but he has extended invitations to community organizations to visit the property on guided tours where he describes the property and its assets. He points out the wildlife, explains the projects underway thereby encouraging community involvement. Waterloo Region Nature has held several outings led by David on the property. The Junior arm of WRN has also spent time there. David serves as an ambassador for this property constantly promoting the ongoing activities.

David reports all his activities and travels on his blog "Travels with Birds" The blog is very detailed and beautifully illustrated with outstanding photographs by he and his wife. He is meticulous in crediting people with what they have done on a project: e.g. who built the salamander boards and the innovations in the design. He freely expresses his gratitude.

Although David spends many, many hours at Sprucehaven every week he also spends time in other natural areas observing the bird life. For several years he has been monitoring bird activity at the University of Waterloo and at *rare* Charitable Research Reserve. He delivers, on a regular basis, beautifully illustrated, lively lectures to members of the public at the Kitchener Library on behalf of WRN and the Kitchener Natural Areas Program (KNAP). He created a bird-themed playscape for the Westmount Sports Park which is well loved by local youth. He has led Jane's Walks birding in Kitchener. All these things he does with enthusiasm, and

unbelievable energy. David spends every waking hour he can in the great out-of-doors, binoculars at the ready and camera on alert  
Often the words "inspirational" and "exhausting" are used in describing David in action. Few can match his level of interest and intensity and knowledge.  
We believe that he is more than worthy of The Waterloo Region Nature Conservation Award.

Graham & Marg Macdonald  
&  
Stephanie Sobek-Swant

Please see attached Letter of Support from Stephanie Sobek-Swant  
Also we wish to thank the owners of Sprucehaven, Dave Westfall and his sister Sandy Hill for the incredible support they have given David at each step along the way and for the welcome given to members of WRN and the public to their property and into their home! Thank you very much!