



THE PLAIN DEALER

A lakefront salute to early birder

Lakefront salute to an early birder

Thursday, October 30, 2008

You won't read a front-page obituary about Tom LePage or find a death notice in the Metro section. There wasn't a funeral or even a memorial service - he specifically requested that no one make a fuss after he died.

Rather, birders who knew Le-Page raised a toast in his honor or said a little prayer. Lord knows he deserved all of this recognition and more.

LePage was 83 when he died of natural causes about a week ago in his apartment in Rocky River. A coroner's investigator found him in a chair that had been a gift of appreciation from the Kirtland Bird Club for his decades of volunteer work.

LePage never married. He lived an ascetic life devoted almost entirely to watching birds. For years, he stayed at the West Side Cleveland YMCA, choosing to invest the bulk of his funds in birding gear and field trips.

He was part of an exclusive group of veteran Northeast Ohio birders who pursued the hobby before it was popular, and he laid the foundation for much of our birding history today. His peers were Bill and Nancy Klamm, Larry Rosche, Dick and Jean Hoffman, Elinor Elder, Jerry Talkington, Ray Hannikman, Emil Bacik, Woody Stover, Dave Corbin and John Pogacnik.

Although unable to drive, he continued to attend Kirtland Club meetings, courtesy of Paula Lozano.

For 30 years, he was the chief compiler of Cleveland's Christmas Bird Count and a frequent contributor to the "Cleveland Bird Calendar."

LePage was a mentor to countless area birders.

"I'd often go birding with Tom," said Vince Lucas, formerly of Westlake, who shared a passion for stamp collecting with LePage. "He taught me a lot as I was just a beginner birder at the time. He was very knowledgeable and a decent human being."

Jim Heflich of South Euclid offered a heartfelt testimonial. "Probably never has there been such a combination - extreme humility and superstar birding skills."

Rob Harlan remembered Le-Page as "a good birder, a good friend and, most importantly, a good man - a shining example of what every birder should aspire to be."

As a legacy, three of his photographs of rarities are included in Rosche's essential book, "Birds of the Cleveland Region." They include shots of Ohio's first record of a sharp-tailed sandpiper, at Dike 14 in 1984; a yellow-crowned night-heron at the Rocky River Reservation in 1980; and a Heerman's gull in Lorain in 1980.

He also was credited with finding the state's first-ever tufted duck and royal tern and a first-ever summer record of a rough-legged hawk at Wildwood Park.

"Tom was truly old-school and sought no notoriety for himself," Rosche said. "He was the kindest gentleman you would ever meet and . . . a class guy who, with Bill and Nancy Klamm, made the lakefront a legendary birding hot spot. He found numerous lifers for many a young Turk and was always happy to show anyone any cool bird.

"All of us saluted the lakefront today in his honor."

- James F. McCarty

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