Yorke Edwards: a Natural Thinker

By Robert Cannings

This is a long overdue tribute to a man whose thoughts and energies have helped shape the minds and lives of countless naturalists across the country. For almost half a century Yorke Edwards has been a pioneer in wildlife biology, nature education, conservation, and museum life, stimulating people to think more deeply about the world and our place in it (Figure 1). The first part of this tribute outlines the career of the man himself; the second offers the recollections of two British Columbia biologists, Rob Cannings and Trevor Goward, in an attempt to chart the course of Yorke Edwards' far reaching influence on them.

Figure 1.
Portrait of Yorke Edwards that hangs in Royal British Columbia Museum

Roger Yorke Edwards was born in Toronto in 1924. As a child, reading the nature writings of Ernest T. Seton and Thornton W. Burgess plunged him into biology; the colourful Audubon bird charts that hung on the walls of his Toronto school drove him to memorize the plumages of all the species he came across. His passion for birds during high school was shared by his friend John Crosby, who later became one of Canada's foremost bird artists. (He painted the plates for Godfrey's *Birds of Canada* [1986].) On their bicycles, the two birded fanatically around Toronto and became enthusiastic members of the Royal Ontario Museum's Intermediate Naturalists Club. His friends there were also to become well known in biological and naturalist circles: Bob Bateman, Bruce Falls, and Bristol Foster.

From 1944 to 1948 Yorke studied forestry at the University of Toronto; here lay the origins of the wildlife biologist and museum man. In the summers he studied small mammal populations in Algonquin Park and was a part time preparator of vertebrate specimens at the Royal Ontario Museum. While studying in Toronto he heard Ian McTaggart-Cowan lecture on wildlife research in the Rocky Mountain National Parks; he was enthralled, and eagerly accepted McTaggart-Cowan's invitation to study with him at the University of British Columbia.

By 1950 Yorke had his Master's degree in zoology and botany. In 1951 he married Joan Thicke of Vancouver and began a challenging job as a research officer with the British Columbia Forest Service in Victoria. In those days, provincial parks were managed by the Forest Service, and much of Yorke's wildlife research was concentrated in places like Manning and Wells Gray parks. He and his team often

tangled with the Forest Service in their attempts to introduce experimental management tools such as controlled burning.

Yorke championed a new cause in 1959 — nature interpretation in parks. He talked his superiors in the Forest Service into giving it a try. They gave him a summer student, a hundred dollars, and said "go to it" (Edwards 1991). Yorke scrounged a mildewed tent to go over a discarded tent floor and frame near the Pinewoods parking area in Manning Park. Inside, they made exhibits of rocks and flowers, bird pictures, and Beaver workings. A sign announcing "Nature House" hung over the door. Despite the fact that the place was frequently mistaken for a washroom, the program never looked back (Figure 2). Over the years it brought nature houses, interpretive signs, nature trails, and naturalist talks to most parts of the province. Widely admired, the program set a standard for outdoor education across the country. In 1967 Yorke accepted an invitation from the Canadian Wildlife Service in Ottawa to create the same thing on a national scale. During the following years five Wildlife Centres sprang up across Canada, from Bonaventure in the Gaspé of Quebec to Creston in the Kootenays of British Columbia.

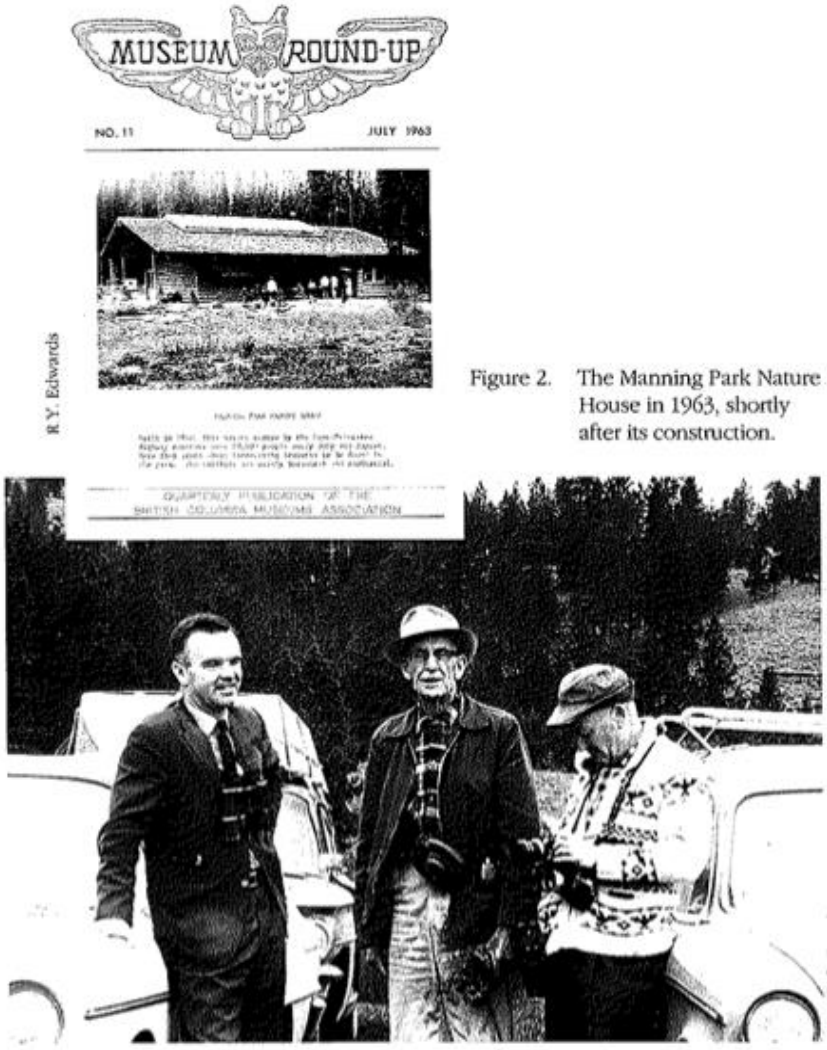

Figure 2. The Manning Park Nature House in 1963, shortly after its construction.

Figure 3.

Yorke Edwards, Freeman (Skipper) King and Steve Cannings at a British Columbia Nature Council meeting in Fairview, BC, May 1964.

Yorke returned to British Columbia in 1972 to become the Assistant Director of the Provincial Museum, and from 1974 to 1984 he was its Director. In the 1960s he had been president of the British Columbia Museums Association and had written and spoken volumes on museums and the museum community.

This, along with his museum experience in Toronto, and especially his extensive work in public education, prepared him well for managing a major museum. Since his retirement he has been active in private biological and museological consulting and writing. Yorke has served on the executives and boards of many conservation and natural history organizations ranging from the Canadian Nature Federation to Owl and Chickadee magazines, and from the British Columbia Forest Museum to Nature Conservancy of Canada (Figure 3 above). He has won many awards for his dedication to the understanding and preservation of Canadian nature, including the Interpretation Canada Award for Outstanding Achievement, and Canada's 125th Year Medal. He is a Fellow of both the Royal Geographical Society of Canada and the Canadian Museums Association and a Research Affiliate at the Royal British Columbia Museum.

The scope of Yorke Edwards' writing is impressive; his publication list includes over 320 entries. He published his first scientific paper on Meadow Jumping Mice (*Zapus hudsonius*) in 1945 when he was an undergraduate. Some of his wildlife management papers, especially those based on his studies in Wells Gray Park, are classics, including the works on fire and Moose (*Alces alces*) range (1954), snow and ungulate behavior (1956), diseases and parasites of Moose (Edwards and Ritcey 1958), and on lichens as food for Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) (Edwards et al. 1960). He also wrote widely on birds (1953a, 1969a, 1994). Perhaps his most influential works are those dealing with wildlife conservation and park interpretation (1953b, 1960, 1963, 1965, 1967, 1969b, 1971a & b, 1976, 1989) (Figure 4).

Figure 4.
Yorke Edwards on Wells Gray Mountain in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park, August 1957.

He recognized the value of writing for children (1970a) and worked hard at it. Naturalists' newsletters and magazines are full of his articles (1963, 1967, 1985a, 1994), as are journals and books about museums (1974, 1985b). His book, *The Mountain Barrier* (1970b), was a popular treatment of the ecology of the mountains of western Canada; his latest major work is the chapter on British Columbia in *The Enduring Forest* (1996).

While a young wader of ponds and student of nature growing up in the Okanagan in the early 1960s, I had among my heroes those biologists from Victoria who now and again passed through Penticton and sometimes visited our home — Chess Lyons, my father's boyhood pal and my early guide in botany; Cliff Carl, guru of the Provincial Museum and its enthralling series of biological handbooks; Yorke Edwards, inventor of the Parks Branch naturalist programs and their treasured Nature Houses. At 15 I was mortally disappointed when Yorke turned down my application for a naturalist job: "Still a bit green," he said. I got the job on my second try the next year and went on to enjoy many wonderful summers submerged in the natural world, surrounded by knowledgeable friends who were also high on parks and nature education. Yorke habitually wrote little profiles of his summer naturalists in a staff newsletter; one of his notes about me that first year read: "Sketches of birds and other beasts are apt to litter his desk." I count that simple encouraging comment among the main reasons why my penchant for illustration plays such a major role in my scientific work today. He affected many in this sort of way.

When I was a more seasoned third-year undergraduate student, Yorke lured me to Ontario, to work in his newly founded national nature interpretation system. This continental perspective really opened my eyes to the biological riches of Canada. Over the years we corresponded now and again about biology, education, and job opportunities. After finishing a Master's degree in zoology, I moved to Victoria to work for the Parks Branch again, and this time put to use many things I had learned from Yorke and his colleagues (Bill Barkley, David Stirling, Ted Underhill, and many others). I inventoried the biological diversity of new parks, I planned naturalist programs, laid out nature trails, and tried to convince park planners and engineers to build campsites and parking lots in the most unobtrusive places.

At this time, in the early 1970s, Yorke was back in Victoria as Assistant Director of the Provincial Museum, working with his old Toronto compatriot, Bristol Foster. When Bristol left the museum to found the Ecological Reserves Program in 1974, Yorke became Director. After that, I hung around the museum a good deal. How I wanted to work there! How I wanted to write a museum handbook to put beside all those wonderful, slim volumes on my shelves, written by Cliff Carl, Adam Szczawinski, Ian McTaggart-Cowan and others! With Yorke's encouragement I wrote, with Kathy Stuart of the University of British Columbia, a museum book on the dragonflies of British Columbia (Cannings and Stuart 1977). It was also in those days that my brothers and I began writing *The Birds of the Okanagan Valley* (Cannings et al. 1987), a book that probably owes its life to Yorke Edwards. And in 1980 I started working at the museum — a dream I had cherished ever since those days as a kid when I identified Long-toed Salamanders (*Ambystoma macrodactylum*) using old Handbook No. 2 (Carl 1959). Yorke was instrumental in my obtaining what I consider to be the perfect job; not because he was the director and knew me, but because I had, under his influence, become a generalist in natural history and public education, as well as a specialist in a particular discipline.

There are many like me who count Yorke as a significant influence on their lives. One good friend of mine who knows full well his debt is Trevor Goward. I met Trevor long ago though our Parks Branch connection — that is, through our Yorke Edwards connection.

At the age of 15, Trevor was captivated by the works of Henry David Thoreau, and the New England writer became his guiding light. Following Thoreau's lead, it was natural he should eventually find his

own Walden Pond, build his home in a clearing in the woods, and dedicate his life to the study of natural history. But Thoreau's nineteenth century perspectives covered only the generalities, not the particulars, of twentieth century life. They held few answers to the practical questions of Trevor's early adulthood. What disciplines should he study? Where was his Walden Pond? How should he make a living? Looking back at his responses to these questions, Trevor has come to realize that Thoreau was not the only compass in his life. Many of the major decisions of his adult life could be traced back, at some point, to the visions and enthusiasm of Yorke Edwards.

The initial connection was made through two specific things Trevor and Yorke had in common: a love of Wells Gray Park and a commitment to educating people about the natural world. During the summer of 1973, Trevor began his love affair with Wells Gray Park. Summer after summer, for 13 non-consecutive years until 1989, he returned to work as park naturalist in the program Yorke had masterminded more than 15 years earlier.

One of the things that appealed to Trevor about Wells Gray was the long tradition of research that had been conducted in the park. To this he could contribute his own work. Chess Lyons had made the first reconnaissance survey of Wells Gray in 1940. Ten years later, in 1950, Pat Martin had followed with a comprehensive wildlife study. This research provided the necessary foundation for future studies, but did not actually propel them. It was a report written by Yorke in 1951 that provided that impetus. In prose reminiscent of Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1966), Yorke proposed that the Forest Service conduct a ten-year biological study in the park. The proposal succeeded, and over the decade from 1952-1962, dozens of game biologists, ornithologists, vascular botanists, lichenologists, and bryologists have contributed to our knowledge of Wells Gray Park.

Trevor discovered Yorke's work, and the work of his colleagues, shortly after his arrival as a naturalist in 1973, but could find very few of the original reports. Yorke mailed his own copies of these documents to Trevor. Trevor, for his part, duplicated them, thereby initiating a Wells Gray library that he maintains to this day. At last count, it contained more than 250 papers, reports, articles, and books. Probably no other provincial park in the province has been studied in more detail. When Trevor decided to leave park naturalist work and become an independent researcher, he summarized what was known about the park's natural history in *Nature Wells Gray*, now in its second edition (Goward and Hickson 1995). That book is dedicated to Yorke and to other early researchers.

By 1977, Trevor had begun to study lichens, and had already made a small collection from Wells Gray. One day a letter arrived from Teuvo Ahti, a renowned Finnish lichenologist who had collected lichens in Wells Gray in 1961 (while on his honeymoon!). He had been invited to British Columbia to study the relationship between Caribou and lichens in the park. The invitation had been extended by none other than Yorke Edwards. Ahti had heard of Trevor's Wells Gray lichen studies, and was writing to suggest that they publish their results jointly. The paper didn't actually appear until 1992 (Goward and Ahti 1992), and by then Trevor had decided that lichenology would be the focus of his life's work. These days he makes his living studying lichens and for this, he happily agrees, he has Yorke to thank.

Trevor emphasizes that he always wanted to live next door to a park. He wanted to spend his days in a place unaffected by logging, mining, urbanization, or other human disruptions of the landscape. Because of his love for Wells Gray Park, and the history of research there, he was drawn to the Clearwater Valley, snug against the park's southern edge. But mostly his decision to settle there was influenced by the existence of a narrow peninsula of private land that runs up into the park from the south. Living within that peninsula satisfied his desire to live adjacent to a park. Before Yorke's day, the southern boundary of Wells Gray did not include this peninsula of private land. It was Yorke and the other biologists of the time who argued that the park boundary should be extended southward in two lobes: one to the west, to protect key Moose wintering range and one to the east, to maintain vital Caribou wintering habitat. This boundary further satisfied Trevor's need for a wild place buffered from change. In Trevor's choice of a home too, Yorke's influence made itself felt.

This is the story of a man and two friends who were guided by him. Trevor and I have other friends who can tell similar stories. They are people of Yorke's generation who worked with him. They are from younger generations, like Trevor and me, who can recall his influence from their youth. Hundreds of students who have been park naturalists in British Columbia and across Canada, whether they know it or not, have been affected by his ideas. Today they are biologists, university professors, artists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, parents.

Figure 5.
Freeman Tilden (87 years old), "dean" of North American nature interpretation, in conversation with Yorke Edwards at Wye Marsh Nature Centre, Midland Ontario, April 1970.

Thousands of others who have visited parks, wildlife centres, and museums, or who have read his articles and heard his talks, have come away with a bit of Yorke Edwards (Figure 5).

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