



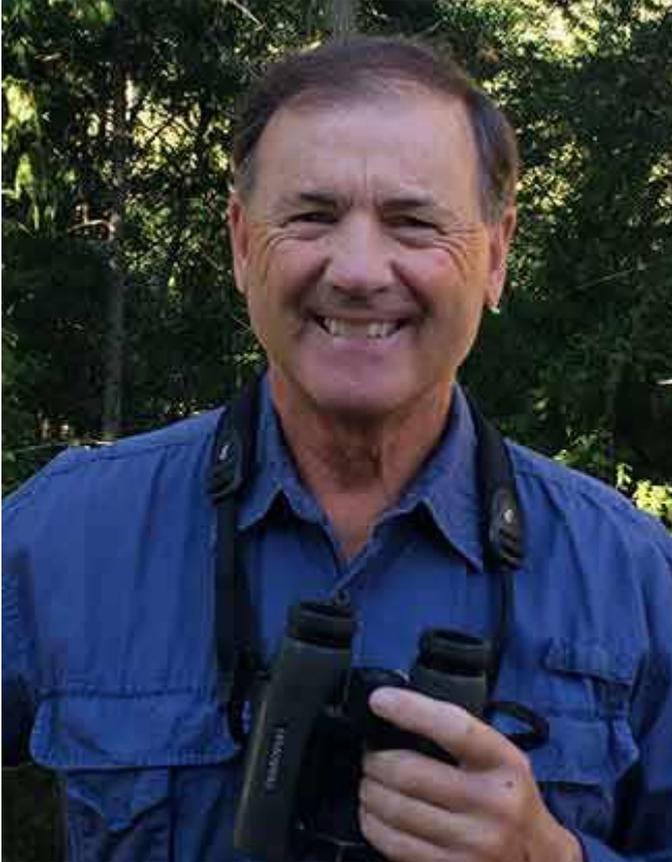
Dr. David M. Bird,
from birds to drones

Description

The acclaimed ornithologist talks UAVs at upcoming BPQ lecture

By **Jane Cormack**

A familiar face and voice to many Westmounters, **Dr. David M. Bird**, Emeritus Professor of Wildlife Biology at McGill University, will present a talk to **Bird Protection Quebec (BPQ)** on **Monday, October 2** entitled ***Drones: A New Tool for Bird Research and Conservation***. Like all BPQ talks, this presentation is free of charge and is open to all.



Dr. David M. Bird

Most widely known for his *Bird's Eye View* column, which ran regularly in the Montreal Gazette for nearly 30 years, and for starting the Peregrine Information Centre in Place Victoria, Dr. Bird also produced popular weekly nature reports for CFCF-CTV and the Discovery Channel. He appeared frequently on CJAD and CBC broadcasts to talk and answer questions about anything related to birds. He led annual birdwatching walks for the general public.

He has served on many ornithological boards, is the author of several books and almost 200 peer-reviewed scientific publications. He has received numerous awards for his conservation and public education efforts, including the prestigious Doris Huestis Speirs Award for outstanding lifetime contributions to Canadian ornithology, in August 2017.

He is now living in Victoria, B.C. WestmountMag.ca interviewed him about his passion for birds, conservation groups, and wildlife research.

How do you feel about coming back to Montreal?

Absolutely thrilled. I spent a long time in Montreal. I love the city. It's a great opportunity to meet up with old friends and 'fans'. I would grab any chance to come to Montreal, in a heartbeat.



McGill University PhD student Dominique Chabot launches small drone in Kouchibouguac National Park, NB, to survey vulnerable 6,000-nest Common Tern colony – Image: Gilles Maillet

What about coming all this way to talk to BPQ?

I feel honoured to be part of Bird Protection Quebec (BPQ)'s centenary celebrations. BPQ is a well-organized, well-managed, highly effective organization that is run entirely by volunteers. I've always been amazed by the number of dedicated, passionate people who are involved and by the tremendous amount of work they accomplish for birds, birdwatching, education, and conservation. What's more, I'm excited about the talk. It's a controversial subject.

Birds will need to adapt to survive. There will be winners and losers.

Is it worthwhile? What about the current status of birds? Are you depressed over declining populations of bird species?

I feel depressed about the future of nature on Earth and what humans are doing to it. Due to population increases, there will be well over 9 billion people on the planet by the year 2050. Fragmentation of habitat and climate change will continue to have an impact on bird populations.

David Bird

Already, earlier springs are affecting migrating birds. Warblers, for example, are not always able to find the food they need when they arrive here on their journey to their breeding grounds.

The Gray Jay – or Canada Jay – caches food and needs cold weather to store it. It incubates its young in -30° C weather.

Birds will need to adapt to survive. There will be winners and losers. An infinite amount of work needs to be done to document changes and to find ways to improve the situation.



Rotary drone flies high over Bald Eagle nest in Saskatchewan to take images of its contents. Image: Jon Gerrard

Can the average citizen do anything about it?

There is actually a lot you can do. Start by practicing the three Rs of the environment: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle.

Join an organization like BPQ that is devoted to birds and conservation. Even if you never get out to a meeting or go on a field trip, just by joining, you give these organizations a stronger voice.

But, once you're there, you just might try one of the annual events, such as the Montreal or Hudson Christmas Bird Counts. These events draw in a high number of participants and they're a lot of fun. You'll get to meet the people involved and you'll be contributing to a greater understanding of bird populations and migration trends. Observations and data collected from ordinary people – all types of birdwatchers – are compiled into citizen science databases. These contribute a great deal to the overall picture and the general knowledge of the presence and absence of bird species.

The subject is still controversial. Not all biologists agree with using drones. However, numerous studies are taking place.

What about your personal interest in bird research? What sparked your interest in birds?

From the age of ten, when I was an army brat living in Toronto, I was always hanging out in the woods. Initially, I was more interested in fishing and hunting. Then, I began watching falcons and developed a keen interest in falconry. But I couldn't keep a falcon in my home.

I followed another interest – for fast cars – and began a degree in automotive engineering at Waterloo before switching to Guelph to study wildlife biology.

Raptors were the main focus of my research during the four decades I was at McGill. I managed a colony of American Kestrel, the smallest North American falcon. I was the first in the world to produce a falcon from artificial insemination. I was also the first to release Peregrine Falcons in a city, about 50 of them in Montreal in the 70s and 80s.



Drone surveys Thick-billed Murre colony at Digges Island, Nunavut – Image: Émile Brisson Curadeau

How did you get from birds to drones?

A former student called me up. One of his relatives wanted to use a drone that looked like a hawk in order to scare away starlings in a vineyard in the Okanagan Valley. They wanted me to build it.

I began to see the potential for wildlife research. Compared to traditional research methods, using drones is less disruptive, cheaper, greener, and much safer.



Testing a drone.

Consider counting Bald Eagle chicks in a nest. You could climb a tree. It would probably take over an hour. You would be disturbing the birds the whole time and putting yourself at risk of injury. Flying close to a nest in a manned aircraft would be even more disruptive and you'd be putting yourself at even greater risk. In fact, the number one cause of on-the-job mortality for wildlife biologists is plane and helicopter crashes.

The subject is still controversial. Not all biologists agree with using drones. However, numerous studies are taking place. Recently, researchers have used fixed-wing drones to monitor the abundance of nesting Common Terns, in New Brunswick; to count seabirds, in Newfoundland; to map breeding habitat of threatened Least Bitterns, near Baie-du-Febvre, Quebec; to detect heat signatures from bird nests, to radio-track songbirds in Montmorency, Quebec; and to disperse nuisance birds, such as starlings, from vineyards and blueberry crops, in British Columbia. They have used rotary drones to survey the nests of several raptors, in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and to monitor their responses.

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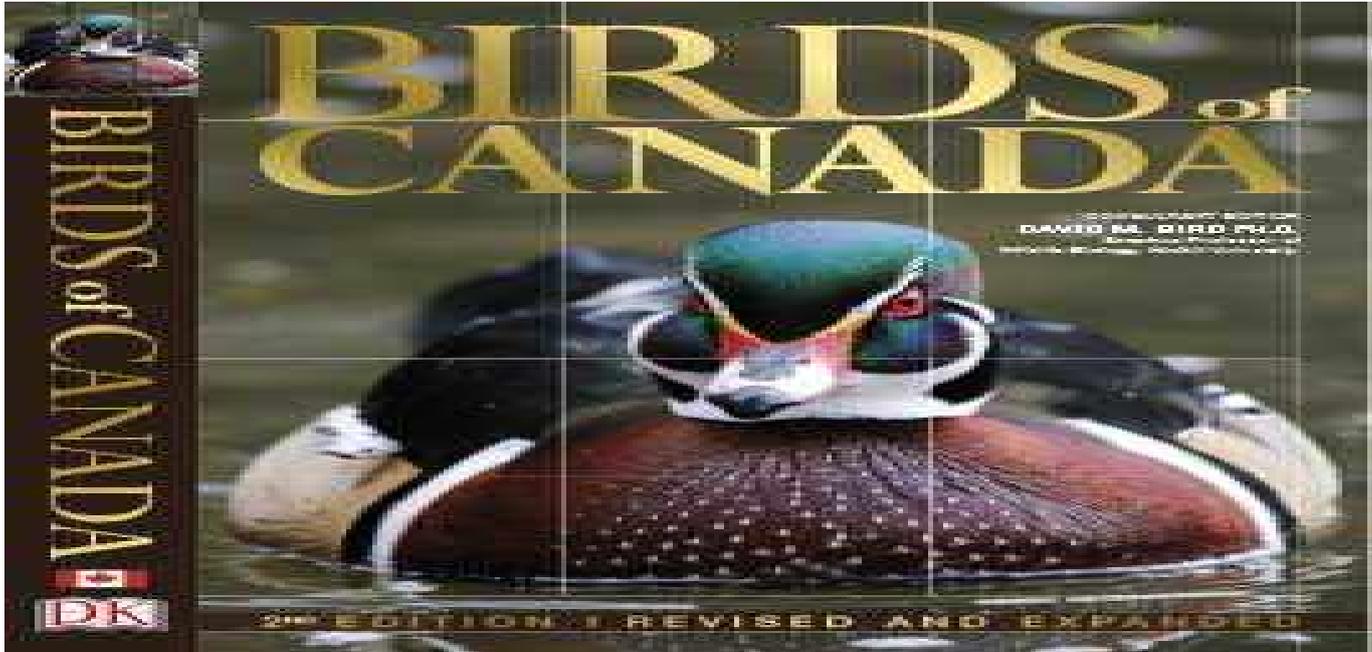
out to the lecture to learn more

Drones: A New Tool for Bird Research and Conservation
Monday, October 2 at 7:30 pm

Kensington Presbyterian Church
6225 Godfrey, NDG

Small unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) — aka drones — are gaining in popularity. Wildlife biologists and conservation managers are using them for conducting population surveys, tracking radio-tagged animals, sensing and observing animals in sequestered or dangerous places, mapping and monitoring wild habitats, and deterring poachers.

Yet, drone technology is still in its infancy. Limitations exist in the form of regulations, costs, and in the



test
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David

M. Bird has worked with UAVs for more than 10 years. He is the founding editor of the Journal of Unmanned Vehicle Systems and a board member of Unmanned Systems Canada. He has given several keynote/plenary talks and organized symposia, workshops, and panel discussions on UAVs and wildlife studies at conferences worldwide.

He continues to write for *Bird Watcher's Digest* and *Canadian Wildlife* magazines, and to serve as the consulting editor of DK's *Birds of Canada*, *Birds of Eastern Canada*, *Birds of Western Canada*, *Pocket Birds of Canada*. Coming this month, the second edition of ***Birds of Canada***. This book will be featured at the Toronto International Film Festival. Visiting celebrities will find it in their gift bag in their hotel.

The book also will be available during his presentation on October 2. He will be on hand for autographs.

Feature image: Adult Bald Eagle escorts but does not attack rotary drone flying through its nesting territory – Image: Jon Gerrard



Jane Cormack is a Vice-President of Bird Protection Quebec (BPQ). She is the editor of the BPQ newsletter *The Song Sparrow*.



Category

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