

2014 Jamie Smith Memorial Award for Mentoring

Tony Gaston

The Jamie Smith Memorial Award for Mentoring is one of the top honours bestowed by the SCO-SOC. It is awarded to individuals who are committed to the training and development of the next generation of Canadian ornithologists. I am pleased to announce, belatedly, that the 2014 award was presented to Dr. Tony Gaston.



Dr. Gaston is a consistent motivator, always pushing students and colleagues to excel. Tony has supervised (directly or indirectly) many of Canada's current seabird biologists and members of the SCO, including Grant Gilchrist, Mark Hipfner, Ian Jones, Vicki Friesen, Shoshanah Jacobs, Akiko Shoji, Garry Donaldson and Kerry Woo—to name just a few.

Tony is a field ornithologists' field ornithologist. Well after retirement, he continues to visit the Arctic, India and Haida Gwaii for extended field seasons each year. Even in the company of twenty-something field assistants, he works harder than anyone else in camp: up in the early

morning to check band numbers in the best light, carrying the heaviest load up the cliffs to camp, and organizing long bird hikes on his day off. His passion for birds, ornithology, Arctic biology and field biology in general is instilled in those around him; even those field assistants that had never previously paid attention to birds or biology become fascinated by the Arctic environment.

Tony therefore leads by example. He does not have dozens of students in his lab, but rather one or two carefully-selected students at a time, and has ample time and energy available to mentor each student. As his students spend months in the field with him each year, he develops strong relationships with his students. He has an excellent handle on their abilities and the details of their projects, and therefore is able to give relevant advice. I have yet to meet one of Tony's students that is unimpressed by his work ethic; his enthusiasm is contagious, and his students develop the dedication needed to excel in field biology. Tony's



Tony with A. Mangiuk. Tony worked alongside Inuit, and local knowledge is an important component of some of his inventories.

presence in camp, and good humour, mean that his students also learn and develop the skills for good leadership.

As an Oxford-Cambridge graduate, Tony has excellent writing abilities. He finds simpler and more accurate ways of saying something, a trait that is essential for publishing—I wish he were able to correct this summary, as it would be much improved! Tony is always happy to improve



Tony with his Tilley hat, and Keith Hobson, on a rope catching thick-billed murrelets at the immense Digges Island colony.

students' writing and teach them the intricacies of the English language, whether it is a Japanese student with little knowledge of English or a native-speaker with a degree in English Literature (both of whom he has mentored as graduate students). Furthermore, for Tony science is meaningless unless published. He therefore pushes each of his students to publish early and often.

Tony is an individual with great integrity. He carefully considers the welfare of birds before embarking on a project, and pays great attention the quality of data collected. His interest in conservation, in particular, merits mention. He was involved in the creation of the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society, the Greater Himalaya National Park and Gwaii Haanas National Park, and is currently heavily involved in efforts to educate the public about the effects of climate change in the Arctic. He instills that sense of integrity—and need to pay back to the birds and to society—in his students.

Outside of academia, Tony has mentored countless volunteers at the Laskeek Bay

Conservation Society (LBCS). A former executive director of LBCS wrote: “Following several years of his own research of the Ancient Murrelet in Haida Gwaii, Tony was passionate about keeping the monitoring project alive and from that passion a conservation society was born. Every year for the past 25 years, a field staff of biologists, along with volunteers and students, descend on a tiny island in Haida Gwaii to collect data. Volunteers are provided with training in scientific techniques and they learn about the ecology of the Laskeek Bay area. Seabird monitoring in Haida Gwaii is relevant and simultaneously, the transfer of knowledge that Tony so generously shares with students/scientists, and anyone who will listen is nonpareil. His passion for his discipline is evident, returning to Haida Gwaii year after year to carry on his

research in addition to other bird research across the globe. He introduced students to join him in research which sometimes meant students being plunged into remote wilderness settings for the first time; his genuine love for the natural world is evident. He encouraged students to publish their findings, and he also encouraged the Laskeek Conservation Society to publish research. His enthusiasm about birds is contagious and whether addressing academics, students or volunteers, one couldn't help but be interested in his seabird research specifically, and, in general, gain an appreciation and awe for the interconnectedness of nature.”

Tony has also mentored a number of students from Europe, and often brought in students from the UK or Germany that had little opportunity to study truly wild birds. A former Master's student noted “Without knowing him, I contacted him to ask if he had a subject for a diploma thesis. While keeping closely track of the progress of my work, he never took charge of it, but encouraged me to take responsibility for its progression myself. He was always available for discussions of the work and would happily provide valuable comments and advice. Tony is a highly rated expert in his field, and his enthusiasm for and understanding of ecology and birds is outstanding and was very influential for my further career. In a very friendly and persistent way,



Tony mentoring a student on the finer details of tobogganing at Prince Leopold Island. He certainly knows how to have fun in the field.

he pushed his students to excel and to finish their work to high standards, and he provided us with the tools to become accomplished scientists ourselves.”

Tony Gaston would no doubt be considered a fine choice by Jamie himself. Upon completion of his undergraduate thesis, a previous Honours student of Jamie asked Jamie about opportunities working in the Canadian Arctic. Jamie immediately directed him

towards Tony, recounting some of the stories Tony had passed on to him about the immense seabird colonies in the Canadian Arctic. Tony and Jamie overlapped at the Edward Grey Institute (Oxford University), and they developed their friendship as they both moved to Canada. He praised Tony's commitment to field research and told me him would be in good hands for learning about Arctic ornithology. Nothing could be truer.

Tony Gaston truly embodies the spirit of the Jamie Smith Mentoring Award in Ornithology, both as a mentor and in creating a lasting legacy of mentorship. On behalf of the award committee, I would like to congratulate Gary on his achievements and encourage others to consider nominating their mentor for next year's award.

Andrea Pomeroy, 2014 Jamie Smith Mentoring Award Committee Chair

Kyle Elliott, 2018 Jamie Smith Mentoring Award Committee Chair