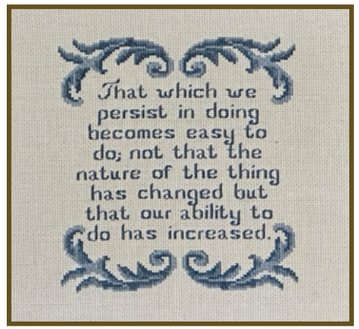
50 Years a Bird Photographer



It's hard to believe I became involved in the photography of birds at the nest over 50 years ago and if I'd known then what I know now and its cost for my passion turning into an obsession there would be no chance in Hell of me ever stepping into a forest to even look at a bird. It cost me a big fortune. It cost me a marriage. It caused me to have a mental breakdown. It's my most sincere hope neophyte bird nest photographers can learn from the mistakes of the pathfinders of the past. The advances in cameras in just the past few years is nothing short of miraculous and the increase in ornithologists' knowledge about our feathered friends has grown exponentially. It's very likely we've learned more about the lives of birds in just the past 10 years than all the preceding years. Watching adult birds doing their daily task of caring for their young is so fascinating that it can become an obsession. The hardest thing in a memoir is to get everything in chronological order. My time as a RCMP file clerk taught me all about filing systems. All my exchanges of letters written between 1974 and 1991 are arranged in chronological order by date and bound up into books. Some people say I'm weird. Others say I'm crazy. A few say I'm a genius and one or two think I'm a crazy genius. My correspondence letters and my field notes are a large part of my memoir.

In the beginning, I wrote to everyone and anyone to garner knowledge about bird nest photography. On the top of the list was the Audubon Society (The premier environmental non-profit society focused on the conservation of birds and their habitats) and The Cornell Laboratory of Ornitholy, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York (The globally renowned college of higher learning dedicated to the study, appreciation and the conservation of birds). In 1984, the exchange of correspondence between staff at Cornell and me suggested we were penpals!

If someone had told me back in 1974, when I began photographing birds at the nest that in 2007 I'd be charged criminally for photographing a family of birds that didn't die I'd have thought it absurd. That's exactly what happened. The potential for fines was a staggering $2,250,000. A few of the 'So Heavenly Bound they were not Earthly Good' birders in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley scrutinized a book I co-authored in 1984 and one my company published in 2007. They were intended to show people the beauty of birds. Instead, birders read every line and studied every picture to show only the negative. None acknowledged the beauty of birds. None admitted I was part of a sting operation costing the Canadian taxpayers in excess of $1,000,000. None acknowledged my mental breakdown.

Bird Photography, 1974 until 1986

When bird nest hunter Glenn Ryder walked into my Maple Ridge camera store in the spring of 1974 looking for a long lens for his camera system, I had no way of knowing this chance meeting would result in a profound change in my life. He had been hired by the provincial government to assist in the production of a four volume set of books about the 'Birds of British Columbia' being planned by R. Wayne Campbell, the Curator of Birds and Mammals at the British Columbia Provincial Museum in Victoria. Glenn was leaving shortly for a few months of bird nest searching in the Okanagan Valley with a photographer who was not remotely aware of the challenges of bird nest photography. It was Glenn's job to find nests for the photographer. Glenn showed me several of the shooter's slides and I recall thinking, with a little practice, I should be able to do as well at bird photography. His images never made it into the book series simply because he knew so little about his subjects. He groomed nests by removing vegetation thereby exposing baby birds for long periods of time without proper shade from the sun.

About this time, a camera store employee loaned me a copy of Eliot F. Porter's book, 'Birds of North America, A Personal Selection' and many a night I studied Eliot's beautiful bird portraits. His incredible images appeared in North America's two volume National Geographic's 'Songs and Garden Birds' and 'Water, Prey and Game Birds' in 1964. Eliot used high-speed strobes to capture flight photographs of parent birds coming in to brood, feed and do janitorial duties with their young. Elliot's photographs contributed half of the books' image content while Canada's Sir Allan C. Brooks', a much decorated sniper in the First World War, paintings made up the rest of the content for the two volumes. Allan's home was in Vernon, a city in the Okanagan. It must have been providence that I met Arthur M. Peake at the local coffee shop and learned years earlier he had been an assistant to Brooks. Art used a shotgun to shoot the birds to be used as specimens for Allan to paint.

The following spring, I photographed some birds at nests but they almost always ended in failure due to my lack of knowledge. In the beginning, my attempt to photograph several nests in a single day was sheer stupidity. Art gave me access to his many shelves of books on ornithology and I slowly began to understand the habits of my feathered friends and how to find nests. Eventually, I began to photograph a single family of birds over several days.

It was best to wait until after the babies opened their eyes to begin photography. The parent birds, with so much invested, never abandoned their babies.

After locating a nest with eggs or young, I should have waited until the babies' eyes opened and then begin to take photographs until they fledged. The last day is always most interesting because the parents and babies were used to my strobes, my blind and me. If the nest was exposed with the use of tiebacks, it was imperative to put everything back to normal and even add cover to further conceal the nest.

When first beginning to photograph birds, I was far too impatient and my subjects suffered as a consequence. In most cases the entire session lasted only one day and the birds were not given the opportunity to adjust to my presence. As a novice bird photographer, I was unable to find anyone with whom to apprentice and authors of books on the subject, although all emphasized the welfare of the birds must be first and foremost, never went into any details about their mistakes and how to avoid them. All of them stressed any photography at a nest attracted predators such as rats, squirrels, weasels, snakes, hawks and owls. Predators have to eat meat to stay alive. It's the circle of life.

By 1977, I was averaging 40 hours a week in the forest during the months of April through July. During this trial and error period, I met Stan Pavlov who said he could find more nests in a day for me to possibly photograph in a week. He was managing an estate of 160 acres nestled under the peaks of the Golden Ears Mountains north of Maple Ridge. Discovering the truth of his claim, we soon became good friends. Stan became my assistant and we began spending more and more time exploring his property in search of birds.

My notebook for 16 May 1978 shows how little I knew about the length of time Varied Thrush young stayed in the nest, 'contained three week old young.' 15 April 1979, 'Found dipper nest under bridge over Blaney Creek at UBC (University of British Columbia) Research Forest. It was found within a yard of where Stan Jr. found one last year. It looked like a miniature-sized moss igloo and was built on top of a rock'. 19 April, 'Up to UBC to photograph the dippers but the creek had come up two feet due to rains making the task difficult and dangerous.' 28 April, 'Checked chickadee nest. Bumblebees had taken over.' 11 June 1980: (Marsh Hawk) 'Left at 7:15. Coming home, I found the tide had come in and had to wade through water almost to my armpits. A beaver swam up behind me and hit the water with its tail causing me to genuflect the knees & take in water at both armpits. I could have drowned." 16 June: 'No luck, drizzle turned into a downpour. Young (Nighthawks) became lethargic so I warmed them by cupping hands and breathing on them for 10 minutes. They recovered.' 10 June 1981: Saw crow clean out a robin's nest. Flew up into the nearest tree and literally beat the life out of the young bird with its powerful beak. 11 June: Spent entire day photographing crows. The adults regurgitated food for the young. They spent the day sleeping, preening, stretching, yawning and dumping. The ready to fledge babies would rise up out of the nest with pink mouths fully agape each time a parent came near the nest.' I was unknowledgeable about my subjects and my actions were unconscionable.

In January, 1981, I flew to Edmonton to meet well-known bird photographer Thomas J. Webb. His ra-

zor-sharp competition prints made me realize I was not filling the frame tightly enough and my flash equipment was not capable of stopping the quick movements of birds in flight resulting in blurred pictures and on returning home most of my pics went into a trash can. Tom suggested purchasing an extremely powerful high-speed custom strobe system to photograph birds in flight. Tom's unit was similar in many ways to the lighting system I used in my portrait and wedding studio utilizing front, side and back lighting. I contacted Ken Olson, its manufacturer, and ordered one of his flash units.

Photographing Seabirds, Triangle Island, 1981

Anne Vallée (1958-1982)

In August, 1981, I had a rare opportunity to visit Triangle Island, a seabird reserve, located in the Pacific Ocean north of Vancouver Island. It is world-renowned to ornithologists since it has an enormous bird population comprised of Cassin's and Rhinoceros Auklets, Tufted Puffins, Pelagic Cormorants, Glaucous-winged Gulls, Pigeon Guillemots and Common Murres. Richard J. Cannings, Assistant Curator of the Vertebrate Museum at the University of British Columbia, and I flew by helicopter to the remote island. Anne Vallée, a doctoral student, was collecting data for her thesis on 'The Breeding success of the Tufted Puffin' on the seabird reserve. Upon reaching the island, we were greeted by Robin Cohen, Anne's assistant. The two young women were staying at a base camp in a trailer they had named the Triangle Hilton.

Almost immediately, Robin, Dick and I left camp to climb Puffin Rock, a steep 700-foot ascent, to visit Anne. She came out of her blind to greet us. She had been watching the comings and goings of seabirds with a spotting scope.

The bird I especially hoped to photograph on Triangle Island was the Rhinoceros Auklet, a most challenging task since the parent rhinos exchanged brooding duties at night and only for a couple of days before the two babies make their dash to the ocean.

One night, I set up a flashlight with an infrared acetate over its lens and directed its narrow beam to a gizmo that in theory fired the camera any time an adult broke the faint red glow of light when going into its burrow. I took up a position on a cliff face in the pitch darkness and heard a number of birds crash land in the tufted hairgrass and salmonberries. After landing, the adult would begin making a mewing call which was answered by a chick. When I turned on my headlamp, I saw a most attractive bird with an orange-brown bill with horn—hence the name rhinoceros—and white plumes behind its eye and bill. It made sense that if I was able to see the faint red glow from 50 feet away, there was no possibility of any pictures. When a rhino took off from a cliff and hit me squarely on the back of the head, I decided to come down and call it quits. All I had managed to photograph was a deer mouse. The only worthwhile photograph of a seabird I managed to obtain on the entire trip was of a colony of Common Murres nesting on the ledges of the precipitous cliffs. The spot where I set up the camera and tripod had to be one of the smelliest places on earth. Murres are highly sociable seabirds and live in large colonies. One cliff shelf, quickly estimated, contained at least 500 birds. For survival against marauding crows and gulls, murres breed synchronously incubating their eggs and brooding their young at the same time. When the chicks finally leave their rock shelves all at once and plunge 200 to 300 feet into the sea, the bonanza for predators is short-lived because of the brief time the young birds are exposed. I was regrettably the cause of incubating and brooding murre parents to fly off the cliff leaving a shower of eggs and babies to fall into the ocean. The pilot of a jet from Canadian Forces Base Comox happened to see me perched on the cliff face and decided to do a flyby for a looky-loo. I tried to wave him off but instead he flew right over me and we could see each other's eyeballs. It was a case of the Air Force not being told Triangle Island was a seabird reserve.

Some notes from my trip: 19 August: 'From 10:00 p.m. to 3:45 a.m. spent curled up on the side of a cliff hoping to photograph a Rhino Auklet coming to its nest. Attire consisted of wool socks, hiking boots, blue jeans, 2-T shirts, cotton shirts, wool sweater, cotton vest, nylon coated rain pants and jacket, wool gloves & headlamp

Common Murre - Uria aalge
Donald E. Waite
August 15, 1981, Anne Vallée Ecological Reserve,
Triangle Island, British Columbia, Canada
500 Murres incubate eggs and brood chicks on a rocky ledge over the Pacific Ocean.

and two scarves across my face. From 10:00 p.m. until 11:30 p.m. quite a number of birds came in.Their landings were very rough in the salmonberry and tufted hair grass. Saw one adult with six inch long skinny fish hanging from its mouth. Saw a brown rabbit feeding on hair grass. Saw mice. Once I heard the whir of wings and instinctively brought my hands up to cover my face. One bird upon taking off immediately above me hit me on the side of the head. Heard the crashing of the waves. As it became darker, it also became much windier and colder. At one two hour stretch from 12:30 a.m. to 2:30 a.m. it was extremely dark. The birds communicated by adults making mewing or moaning sounds. The adults walked to the burrows from wherever they landed. Their arrival in the pre-dawn light seemed to be the smoothest. Gave up at 3:45 a.m.' 20 Aug: 'Took shots of Robin weighing puffin chicks & taking wing measurements. She took ticks off 1 puffin chick'. It occurred to me. Why was she interfering with Anne's study by removing the ticks?

Anne returned to Triangle Island the following year to continue her research, but unfortunately lost her footing while climbing Puffin Rock and fell to her death. Two years later, in 1984, Anne's father came to British Columbia from Quebec for the purpose of presenting a cheque to a graduate student at Simon Fraser University to study seabirds. We met with an associate professor and had lunch. I casually mentioned exchanging correspondence with the Victor Hasselblad Foundation's research and development department about the possibility of placing a movie or video camera on top of their still camera so a photographer could study the activities of birds on a monitor from a distance and fire the camera remotely when the subject struck the right pose. The university's ornithologist became quite excited and suggested supplying him with copies of our correspondence to make an application to the foundation for a grant. He explained the money would be earmarked to purchase

a camera-video system for me to test on seabirds. He got $25,000 but used it to purchase two inflatable boats.

That fall, I interviewed Dr. Patrick Moore, President of Greenpeace International, about the impact of man's activities on nesting areas of seabirds. The most obvious concern was from a major oil spill from super tanker traffic coming from Valdez in Alaska, at the northern terminus of the Alaskan Pipeline, which comes down along the whole coast of British Columbia and then southward all the way down to the Panama Canal. He said an oil spill given the types of winters and the fact machinery always sooner or later breaks down would inevitably result in a major disaster to seabirds and if it occurred off the north end of Vancouver Island, Haida Gwaii, or off the Alaskan Panhandle, it could mean the destruction of millions of seabirds from one tanker spill. Another real serious problem was the depletion of the food supply for large nesting colonies of seabirds up and down the west coast shoreline and on the many islands. There are tremendous fleets of foreign ships operating just off the coast dwarfing the types of fishing boats used by Canadian fishermen. Their nets are scooping everything off the sea bottom leaving it barren. Deep sea gill net fishing has a tremendous bycatch of seabirds with nine mile long nets. The 300 boats in their fleets operate close to the islands and diving birds are caught by the thousands. Supertankers are more likely to get into trouble when just offshore due to rocks, the build up of currents, cross eddies and waves bouncing off the rocky coastline resulting in a much more confused and dangerous sea. Canadian laws demand seven and eight hundred foot long super oil tankers stay outside the 200 mile limit. If one of these ships broke up off the coast of Vancouver Island, half of the shoreline could be inundated with oil depending on the weather, currents and location of the spill. Another serious problem was the habitat destruction caused by intensive logging operations along the BC coast reducing the available area for birds nesting in old growth timber. He mentioned overfishing on the east coast of Canada resulted in the starvation of large numbers of seabirds.

Pat suggested I return to Vancouver's Greenpeace Headquarters in a week's time and interview Adam Reichman, an expert on fishery concerns on the west coast of North America. I arrived for the meeting and moments later the teletype started clacking away saying the Rainbow Warrior, Greenpeace's flagship, had just been sunk killing the ship's photographer. The vessel had been docked at Auckland, Australia, to protest against nuclear testing and the dumping of its waste into the ocean killing whales, seals and dolphins. A subsequent investigation revealed the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior was carried out by the French government in response to Greenpeace's attempt to stop them from doing nuclear testing. Two French divers were charged with manslaughter and sentenced to 10 years in prison. They served two. Thirty years later, pockets of crude oil remained in some locations. The corporate owners of the ship returned it to service under a different name as an ore carrier. It took four years for Pat's prediction to come true when in 1989 the worst oil tanker disaster occurred dumping 11,000,000 gallons of crude oil into Alaska's Prime William Sound and its oil slick covered 1,300 miles of coastline killing hundreds of thousands of seabirds, otters, seals and whales.

In 1982, I read an article in a 'Photographic Society of America' (PSA) magazine about bird photographer Isidor Jeklin of Don Mills, Ontario. He specialized in the photography of birds at the nest with high-speed strobes. I wrote to Isidor and a short time later visited him in his Toronto apartment. One bedroom had been turned into a shrine for the displaying of his 300 medals from the Photographic Society of America along with many enlarged prints. Both Isidor and Tom were at the top of their game in winning first or second medals from the PSA for wildlife photography. Isidor and I talked and he agreed to work with me to publish a book on bird photography. It was an absolutely crazy idea. Upon leaving, Isidor entrusted me with 50 of his best medium format transparencies. Our mission was to produce a book on bird photography. Naive, my original idea was to self publish without a distributor. It wasn't only crazy; it was insane. Luckily for me, we managed to get a publisher.

In October, 1983, I wrote J. Fenwick Lansdowne, the greatest bird painter of the 20th century. He lived in Victoria on Vancouver Island. I sent along several prints taken by Isidor and me over the years. He got back to me with a Foreword to Isidor's and my proposed book.

A year later, Isidor and I co-authored the title, 'The Art of Photographing North American Birds'. The first press run took place in Altona, a small village south of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The publisher paid for Isidor and I to fly to Altona to oversee the printing. The publisher printed 2,000 hardback covers and 12,000 paperbacks.

Isidor and I talked and agreed to meet midway between our homes and photograph prairie birds as it would be an incredible experience for me to work with a much published bird photographer. He, afterwards me, donated duplicate slides to Cornell University.

Upon receiving the first printed copies, I mailed off copies to Eliot Porter, Roger Tory Peterson and Eric Hosking. Roger was the world's most renowned ornithologist. Eric was a pioneer bird photographer from the United Kingdom. Eliot wrote back with kind comments. Roger got back to me with a testimonial. Eric was critical of my photographs. After fuming for several days, I decided to listen to a bird photographer with 50 years experience under his belt and sent my high-speed strobes back to the manufacturer to have the cords lengthened from eight to 15 feet. After all, Prince Philip and some of his buddies used to join Eric to have some fun photographing birds. According to Eric, the huge blind was capable of accommodating several men and had everything except hot and cold running water. Our book went into second, third and fourth printings and low and behold Galahad Books in New York, Eliot's publisher, took on its printing and distribution. Over seven years, it sold 44,000 copies.

Richard B. Trethewey, a charter fund-raiser of Ducks Unlimited in British Columbia, lived in Maple Ridge and I sometimes photographed birds on his farm. Richard was instrumental in reintroducing the Canada Goose and Wood Duck back into the Lower Mainland and other parts of British Columbia. He created a unique fundraising idea and travelled the world to seek the generosity of many high-profile artists to donate their works for a leather-bound art folio 'The Birds of North America' with a custom container box. He arranged for the printing of 1,250 limited edition copies each selling for $1,000. He arranged for Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, to provide the Foreword. Richard gave me the address of His Royal Highness and coached me on how to write a letter. Although composing a letter to Prince Philip with number one of 50 limited edition sleeved copies, it was never sent.

With the success of the first book, Isidor, Lawrence F. Parsons, Isidor's bird photographer associate, and I hit on a bold plan. We would do a trilogy and do two new titles, 'North American Birds: A History of the Art' and 'Photographing North American Birds: Perfecting the Art'.

Author, mentor Isidor Jeklin, and his assistant, Larry F. Parsons, at Pilot Mound, Manitoba.

Photographing Prairie Birds, 1984

In June 1984, I joined Isidor and Larry in Altona, for a two week learning experience photographing prairie birds. The first thing I did was present Isidor with copy number 1/50 of the sleeved book. Through correspondence, we learned a pair of Swainson's Hawks were nesting in a poplar shelterbelt some 60 miles west of Altona in a farming community called Pilot Mound. Finding this area so productive, we decided to spend our entire time working its sloughs and treed areas. My time with Isidor, who had more than 20 years experience photographing birds, proved to be an opportunity of a lifetime and I learned more tricks of the trade than believed possible. Each new piece of information was small by itself, but when all the pieces were added together my increase in knowledge was enormous. For the first couple of days, Isidor, Larry, and I checked out the different areas in order to line up some different nesting situations. Larry used a telescopic golf ball retriever with a large mirror to check out the progress of nests 10 to 20 feet up in trees. As the mirror was positioned above the nest, Isidor would use a pair of binoculars to report whether a nest was empty, contained a clutch of eggs, or had young.

In the past, I often worked a nest for several days but would dismantle all my equipment each night and go home. At Pilot Mound things were very different and it was not uncommon for Isidor and Larry to put eight or more hours in their blinds to photograph a single nesting situation. Most mornings, they would be up at daybreak and shooting for three hours before breakfast since that was when the birds were most active feeding. A drizzle did not put them out of operation since their flash heads were covered by clear plastic turkey freezer bags which allowed the light to pass through without any loss in intensity or shift in colour. Instead of using cumbersome three-legged tripods in the water to hold the flash heads, they used 1" x 2" hardwood stakes of various lengths and pushed them into the mud. The flash heads were then duck taped into position. If the ground was hard, Isidor used a four-foot length of straight iron bar pointed at one end. He used a sledge hammer to pound the bar to make holes in the hard ground for blind posts. Since we were camped near our equipment, Isidor and Larry didn't dismantle the set-up but placed garbage bags over their cameras and tripods just before retiring. Isidor told me how he managed to get pics of both adults at the nest at the same time.

Says Isidor, "It's easy. Just sit in the blind with the flap partially open and when both parents are within a few feet, close the blind and both adults will come in to feed." He had another trick. He had a 4x4 foot wooden frame with chicken wire. He'd weave branches into the mesh and place it behind the nest and use one flash to illuminate the false backdrop. The last task on the agenda each evening before we crawled into our sleeping bags was a detailed accounting of the day's events. It was always from these notes our books would be written.

For ground nesting birds, Isidor drove several stakes into the ground in a bee-line with the nest, the blind and the stakes. By following along these stakes, he was able to come and go using the blind as a cover without ever disturbing the brooding parents. When setting up at one nest, I talked to Isidor about steers pasturing nearby and mentioned his project stood between them and their watering hole. Since I had been raised on a farm, I knew cattle were extremely curious, and so recommended he dismantle his project upon leaving it daily. Isidor told me not to worry as he and Larry would be sleeping in the truck nearby and would be able to hear the movements of the cows. When Isidor got up in the morning, he found the nest, the blind and the tripods trampled into the mud.

One day, I listened and watched while Isidor and Larry discussed the setup for a Swainson's Hawk nest in a shelter belt 20 feet up in a poplar tree. In Altona, they had rented four sections of steel construction scaffolding and long spruce planks and had left them near the nest tree. Isidor decided a green field on the east side of the shelter belt would make an ideal backdrop for photography especially when the adults were backlighted by early morning sun and flying into the wind. Larry placed a ladder against the tree and climbed up to check out the young hawks. The pair took an entire morning putting up the scaffolding and planking. They worked at setting up for half an hour and then would leave for an hour to allow the female time to brood or feed her babies.

For safety, Larry ran out guy ropes from the four corner posts of the tower which were tied off to two trees and two stakes that had been driven into the ground. Once Larry had pulled the five planks up by rope to the top of the scaffolding, he added a three foot high railing for additional safety. Once the scaffolding was up, Larry placed a blind on top. Isidor climbed the tower and entered the blind. With the camera on the tripod, he was shooting down and into the nest. Since birds prefer to fly into the wind when landing, Isidor was able to obtain several profile shots of the female alighting at the nest. Twice the male appeared with a ground squirrel for the female. He would land in a nearby field, devour part of the animal, and then scream for his mate to come for what was left of the squirrel. She always flew down to him for the food. At the nest, she would tear the squirrel into tiny morsels and feed it to her young. During his hours in concealment, Isidor managed to take several photographs. Larry and I also took our turns in the blind.

Our time at Pilot Mound certainly produced its share of excitement and my diary for 21 June read: 'At 6 p.m. a freak storm hits without warning and winds go from zero to 40 or 50 miles per hour in less than one minute. I start the car and race to the blind. The dust coming from the ploughed-in summer fallow between us and the scaffolding is so thick it is difficult to see the tower. I drive the car near the scaffolding and jump out with Larry on my heels. By this time one of the guy ropes has pulled up a stake and the rope is blowing wildly in the wind. The storm has also torn open the Velcro slits on the blind, and all four sides are blowing at the same height as the blind's roof. The wind is so severe I have to run crouched down to keep from being blown over. Just as I am within 20 feet of the tower, a second stake pulls loose and the tower begins to go over with Isidor still in the blind on top of the 20-foot platform. Miraculously, the scaffolding gets hung up in the nest tree and does not crash to the ground. Both flash heads shoot past the nest, and anything not nailed down is blown into the next shelter belt. During all the commotion Isidor still has not become visible. As Larry climbs the ladder against the nest tree, Isidor emerges clutching his camera. He is badly shaken but not injured. Realizing this, I race back to the car and grab my camera and tripod and begin taking photographs. Incredibly the sky is blue with big towering cumulus clouds.'

Showing the extended poles and flash-heads for photographing the Swainson's Hawk before the storm.

In the evening, we returned with the truck and toppled the twisted scaffolding with a winch. A check of the nest revealed the young hawks had come through the ordeal unscathed. Isidor told me this incident was the most dangerous he had experienced in his 70-plus years. In those two weeks, I learned more about bird photography than in the previous eight years. The day after returning home, Carol left with the children and drove back to Prince Albert to visit with her Mom and relatives. I stayed home to take care of a floundering family portrait and wedding business.

Photographing Seabird, Reef Island, 1985

Anne's parents gave grant money to me and in May 1985, I accompanied Dr. Anthony J. Gaston, Co-ordinateur of Seabird Research, Migratory Birds Branch, Canadian Wildlife Service, and Ian L. Jones, a graduate student from the University of Toronto, to Camp Impossible on tiny Reef Island located just south of Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) to photograph seabirds. Ian was doing his thesis on the vocalizations between parents and the young of Ancient Murrelets. The night of my arrival, I accompanied Tony and Ian up a switch-back trail beneath mature stands of Sitka Spruce and Western Hemlock. It was raining and my outer garments consisted of hip waders and a rain slicker as protection against the weather. We used headlamps as we followed along safety ropes running from tree to tree along a steep path to a banding station. When the lamps were turned off, it was impossible to see one's hand before their face. I observed the Ancient Murrelet burrows had been numbered and plastic knock-down tabs placed at the entrance to each burrow to monitor the comings and goings of the parents. Tabs knocked inward or outward indicated an entry or an exit. Untouched tabs signified a burrow was inactive. A night or two later, I tagged along with the scientists to a banding station below one of the study areas. We sat in the dark with our headlamps off and heard murrelets fly in from the ocean and make heavy crash landings. Instantly, a scientist's headlamp went on and the expert, with the aid of a fish net, would make a zig-zag dash down the slope in pursuit of a dazzled murrelet. Breeding murrelets were measured, weighed, banded, and data recorded. The work involved high risk and the previous year Ian tumbled down a slope resulting in the use of a helicopter to get him to the nearest hospital. The scientists, with their headlamps, were able to see non-breeding adults perched in the treetops singing. Some were shot with the aid of a flashlight. At the study area, one of Ian's experiments involved watching parents coming and going to the burrows using a magnification night scope and a parabolic microphone to listen to the chirruping calls between the chicks and their parents.

The female Ancient Murrelet, scarcely larger than a robin in size, lays a clutch of two hen-sized eggs at the end of a burrow. Twenty percent or more of the body weight of the bird is taken up in developing the eggs over almost a month. After the second egg is laid, both parents share in incubation duties. Small circular incubation patches, which lie on each side of the breast bone, are underlain with heavy vascularized skin supplying the necessary heat for the eggs' development. As one parent occupies the nest, the other feeds on plankton coming with the cold upwellings of the North Pacific Ocean. Parent birds alternate nest duties in three night intervals during the 35 days of incubation. Both chicks hatch at the same time and for a day or two are brooded by a parent. While in the burrow, the chicks are not fed. Shortly after darkness, two nights after the chicks have hatched, the parents vacate the burrow but remain nearby, vocalizing strongly to encourage the young birds to emerge. When the chicks are out of the burrow, the parents fly out to the sea and remain calling from offshore. Like wind-up toys the chicks are all but non-stoppable as they flounder down the slope and tumble into the sea in response to their parents' calls. The chicks swim all night and by dawn are far out to sea. They mature rapidly as they perfect their diving skills and soon become independent of parental care. Ian's dedication to his thesis brought this new information to scientists wanting to know more about the life history of seabirds.

Author installing the photo-electric triggering device to photograph Ancient Murrelets on Reef Island, May 1984.

From my notes: Night 15-16 May 1985: 'Spent 2 ½ hours laying on hillside staring up into the huge primeval rain forest of Sitka Spruce so dark I was unable to see my hand six inches in front of my face. Could see the stars through the odd opening in the trees. Slightly robin-like chirrup coming from birds sitting in trees. Night 16-17, 'Up hill at 12 midnight. Few birds were landing as it was windy and the surf rough. Could it be the birds decided to defer the fledge for better ocean conditions? Young would have been bashed on the rocky shoreline last night. If so, would the parents feed their young during the prolonged stay in the nest? Caught two birds on hill - one a breeder - other a prospecting non-breeder. Breeders quickly measured and weighed & banded and then released where captured so they could carry on with parental responsibilities. The non-breeders were given to me and brought down hill but the camera battery failed and the system would not fire. Noted the iris was quick to dilate or contract when I removed light source'. 17 May: 'Spent most of day trying to revive the rechargeable battery to no avail and the battery after several hours hooked up to a generator remained on the 'replace' position when checked on the voltmeter. Decided to try wiring the camera to operate off a 6-volt heavy duty lantern battery. It worked. 26 May: About 2:30 a.m. had one hell of a chase to catch a bird. It was a Cassin's Auklet, a much smaller bird with pale blue yellow iris'. 23 May: 'Although Reef Island has never been logged, the hum of distant saws could be heard from neighbouring islands. Is civilization moving in?'

With the realization the adult murrelets exchanged incubation duties very third night, my chances of getting a photograph was very slim to none. Tony came up with a suggestion. They'd give me non-breeding birds for my photography. I moved down the slope to an abandoned murrelet colony. Tony and Ian had done a study the previous year and an entire colony abandoned their burrows. It was within a five minute walk of base camp. Now when bad weather set in, I could box my gear and quickly carry it to my tent. From my notes, "First bird placed in burrow and made exit moments later at a dead run. Tripped mechanism but the short delay - a few microseconds - results in only the front half of the bird in flight on Polaroid film. As a result, I dug up the box containing the micro-switch and reburied it at the burrow entrance. With a bit of trial and error, an adult took its own picture.' A few years later,The'Living Bird'magaine, the most prestigious ornithology publication in North America, ran a story about the Ancient Murrelet and used two images from my trip to Reef island. The in flight shot made the front cover.

Female Ancient Murrelet - Synthliboramphus intiquus
Donald E. Waite
August 6, 1984, Reef Island, Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, Canada
A murrelet steps on a triggering device to take its own portrait in the pitch black understory of first growth Sitka Spruce.