

## Kathleen 'Mary' Collins (nee Clarke) (1930 – 2005)



Mary Collins was born in 1930 and grew up in Coldstream where she was guided and overseen by her two aunts, Hilly and Winkie and her mother Barbara. It was an English upbringing, enriched by gardening and orchard birds and one filled with many animals, especially horses. At the time these women had the only riding stable in the Vernon area. Mary was sent to Pollock in southern England to become a riding instructor. Her horse was called Okanagan Sunshine. She also took singing lessons and her ear for music stood her in good stead when she did breeding bird censuses later on in life. She was excellent at identifying bird sounds.

Mary grew up surrounded by natural history. Amongst her mother's possessions was a copy of Taverner's Birds of Canada illustrated by Allan Brooks, and a pair of well-used binoculars. Mary campaigned to create Kalamalka Lake Provincial Park and was an inspiration to many to preserve the natural environment. Her enthusiasm for birds influenced many people.

After Mary met Tom Collins they bought land in Lavington which became the Lavington Stock Farm. Mary's association with animals then extended to cows, beginning with beef cattle and then to dairy farming. Any extra time was spent harvesting a large vegetable garden and leading four-wheel drive NONC trips up local mountains. This was long before ATVs and macho trucks! During the time Mary was focused on farming she still was conscientious in conserving wildlife. While haying with a swather she would leave enough uncut hay around a marsh hawk's nest so that it could raise its chicks. Mary would never use 'Roundup' in gardening.

Eventually Mary and Tom moved to an acreage on Learmouth Road where they were gradually weaned off haying equipment and began using a riding mower for their lawn and landscaping. Mary had more time for establishing an English garden – wide herbaceous borders along with fruit trees, shrubs and trees used by birds and wildlife. Their place was adjacent to Jim Grant's homestead. Jim was Mary's mentor. He had an encyclopedic grasp of all flora and fauna, and Mary being a neighbor shared this knowledge. With birds and plants though Mary had a natural eye and memory for field marks. For example she could immediately identify a rarity, such as a European Brambling when it turned up in Lavington.

Mary and Tom's Learmouth Farm became a haven for wildlife. Bears came for the damsons, coyotes ate the chickens, pygmy owls roosted in the outbuildings and birds converged on the overflowing feeders. Mary started a NONC birding group and held meetings in her Cape Cod kitchen at the house. No account of Mary would be complete without mention of the fact that she was a prodigious gourmet cook. NONC being a very social club, its members were well aware of this.

During the Leroouth era an Airstream holiday trailer was spied in Vernon. It was the first in a series of RVs and motorhomes that Mary and Tom owned. Innumerable trips were planned and executed. Some were winter get-away trips but the bulk of them were NONC trips – to Churchill, the Dempster Highway, Malheur in Oregon, and Arizona. Many trips were repeated on the NONC Trip List in subsequent years. All the while Tom took professional-caliber pictures. He had the most up-to-date photography equipment and took expert photos of birds and animals they encountered on their trips. Mary sorted the 100s and 1000s of slides.

Eventually Mary and Tom moved away from farms altogether. They chose 'Sandpiper', a seniors housing complex in Vernon, but it did not last long. They were found tearing down the vines obscuring the views from a neglected lake house in the Coldstream - and soon moved in. This was to become the Bishop Wild Bird Sanctuary. Mary had convinced Lydia Bishop to bequeath her property as a sanctuary for wildlife habitat. Mary and Tom became the first caretakers of the Bishop Sanctuary. Again Mary planted trees, roses and another herbaceous border. Trails and a nature gazebo were constructed for school groups and visitors.

After the death of Jim Grant, Mary compiled the statistics from the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count. The wrap-up and social for this annual event was held at the Bishop Sanctuary every year. Mary even arranged for the circle boundary of the Christmas Bird Count to be changed to include the Collins and Grant bird feeders on their Leroouth Road properties! One room at the Sanctuary house served as a library for NONC books and slides, while the rest of the NONC paraphernalia (summer camp equipment and signs, etc.) was safely stored in the basement. Thus the Bishop Bird Sanctuary acted as a Nature House for NONC and its activities. Mary had vision.

Mary never wanted to be on the executive of the Naturalists Club, but behind the scenes she was an instigator and quietly steered people into jobs. Her suggestions for president and executive positions were taken seriously.

After Tom died in 1997 the time came when Mary could not handle the heavy bags of bird feed, clearing the trails as well as the responsibilities of the Bishop Foundation. She moved to Coldstream Meadows where she died in 2005. Mary was an avid gardener, a keen plant observer, and an animal lover, but birds were her passion. Mary joins a select group of naturalists in her tremendous lifetime contribution to the preservation of bird habitat, wildlife and the natural environment in the North Okanagan.

Pat McAllister  
December 2019