

Grace Morgan Dinner Speaker – May 2023

Merilyn Simonds

Pioneer Female Bird Watchers

Merilyn took us behind the scenes of her acclaimed 2022 book *Woman, Watching: Louise de Kiriline Lawrence And The Songbirds of Pimisi Bay*, published by ECW Press, Toronto. During her fascinating talk she included some bird calls.

“In 1980 when I was 30 and had just had my first book published, I met Louise, then 86 who had just completed her last book,” Merilyn told us. To date Merilyn, who has won numerous awards, has had 20 books published, fiction and non-fiction on a variety of topics. When they met, Louise was internationally famous, succeeding despite considerable sexism in the bird watching community. Louise had lived in her “longhouse nest,” her term for her log cabin, in the remote woods at Pimisi Bay 40 kilometres east of North Bay since the 1940s. Merilyn had recently moved to “a separate patch there,” as she put it. “My impression was that she was an imposing woman, a handsome woman,” Merilyn recalled. “She also was strong-willed and resourceful.” Merilyn was/is an avid birder and the two women became friends. “Ten years later in 1990 when she was 95 and I was 40 and writing for *Harrowsmith* (a naturalist magazine) she asked me to write her biography. Louise died in 1992.

“To depict her in her own voice I read her thousands of letters. They filled 26 boxes in my basement.” Merilyn then read a letter given her at the dinner by member Mary Kirton, a gracious thank you Louise had sent Mary’s mother for her letter complimenting Louise. Merilyn also diligently went through Louise’s many scrapbooks, articles, and manuscript drafts. She personalized by bringing in “a thin thread of my own life with birds.”

Louise was born in 1894 in Sweden into a wealthy aristocratic family – her father was court chamberlain; her godmother Queen of Denmark. She was instilled with a love of birdwatching while a toddler by her father. “Her first words were ‘Caw, Caw,’ not ‘Da Da or Mama,’” Merilyn told us. She became a nurse with the Red Cross during World War 1, married a Russian soldier she had nursed, moved with him to Russia where because he was a tsarist supporter he was murdered by Bolsheviks. Louise escaped to Canada and became a Red Cross outpost nurse covering 2,500 square kilometres by Model T Ford or dogsled depending on the weather. She was the first nurse of the famous Dionne quintuplets, born in May 1934. “It was an intermezzo,” Merilyn said, “and she left after one year for nearby Pimisi Bay for a life with nature. She was then 41.” She married local handyman/carpenter Len Lawrence who built her log cabin home. Alone while he served in World War II, she taught herself ornithology through reading and watching.

“She lived in an ideal area because it was the southern limit of northern birds and the northern limit of southern birds,” Merilyn said. “She pinned a cushion to the hem of her coat to be comfortable while sitting on a stump for hours watching. She had the revolutionary idea that birds have both vocal and body language. For example, chickadees as a threat increases, voice more “dee dee dees and northern flicker woodpeckers spread their wings and tails and point their bill upward. If the situation continues, they leave to dissipate the aggression. We humans should learn from this.”

Louise was a pioneer in linking the precipitous decline in the songbird population to toxic chemical pesticides, introduced the practice of different colour bands for male and female birds, and set a still-standing record for counting bird songs, 22,197 in a day by the especially prolific red-eyed vireo.

Susan Goldenberg