

NATIONAL WILDLIFE WEEK

Bateman: portrait of a nature-loving artist

ROBERT BATEMAN WANTS HIS LEGACY TO INCLUDE INSPIRING YOUNG PEOPLE TO STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES

By Scott White

It was the spring of 1944 and a young Bob Bateman had just finished his morning paper route in what was then the north end of the city of Toronto. He always tried to finish his deliveries as quickly as possible so he would have time for his real passion – birdwatching. It was, even back

then, an unusual hobby for a young boy.

Free of his newspapers, Bob would drop his bike off at Cedarvale Park and scramble into its ravine to hike, to wander and to wonder at the nature all around him. On this particular morning, something made him look up.

There in the sky was a giant flock of white birds with black-tipped wings, flying in V-formation, high above the city. Unfamiliar with what he was seeing, Bob raced home to look up the birds' markings in one of his reference books. They were, he discovered, white pelicans migrating from Florida to the Lake of Woods area of northwestern Ontario.

Seventy years later, Robert Bateman – the artist, the naturalist, a self-described "avid Cana-

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dian" – remembers (and can describe in tremendous detail) that moment as if it happened this morning.

"It's something that's still engraved in my brain as a 14-year-old kid, just because I happened to look up," says Bateman, who this spring found time to hike through the same ravine while staying with friends who live in the Toronto's Forest Hill neighbourhood.

How many 14-year-olds liv-

ing in one of Canada's major urban centres today would bother to look up to catch a glimpse of migrating waterfowl? For that matter, how many would be outside in the first place?

It's an issue that evokes passion from Canada's best-known naturalist artist and the charity that bears his name.

The Robert Bateman Foundation has two missions: it operates the Robert Bateman Centre in Victoria, B.C., which houses an

historic collection of Bateman art; it also challenges the public and society's leaders to find ways to inspire a passion for nature.

Bateman himself describes the goal more romantically.

"We used to say in the 1960s, 'all you need is love,'" says Bateman. "I'm trying to bring love back in my little way... And I'm trying to get people to fall in love with nature. This is basically the aim of the Bateman Foundation."

Young Canadians have diffi-

culty falling in love with nature because "they're bathed in a cacophony of narcissism" that comes with being habitually connected to phones, laptops and game consoles. This, Bateman believes, has created a society that is "hyper-stimulated."

"How do we get kids to really enjoy going out and smelling a flower, when it's up against super stimuli? It's a challenge. It's a real challenge."

"Too many young people

these days fill their faces with junk food for the body and fill their minds with junk food for the soul," says Bateman.

Bateman is proud of the work done by the charitable foundation that bears his name. But the artist, who turns 85 on May 24, has bigger dreams of what the charity could become. The greatest legacy he could leave would be to see programs established across the country in which young people were totally im-

mersed in nature for weeks at a time.

"If every high school kid spent two weeks out in nature away from all influences ...I think it would transform the physical, the mental and the spiritual lives of all Canadians," he says.

The biggest challenge, says Bateman, would be convincing parents that there's nothing to fear by letting kids connect with nature. To make the point, he relates a story from his time as a

high school teacher that, if played out today, would set off alarm bells from education officials, insurance companies and helicopter parents.

Bateman was a geography teacher at a high school in Burlington, Ont. After school, he would hang out with kids in the art department. On nice days, he would suggest they take a ride up to nearby Mount Nemo, part of the Niagara Escarpment. Once there, Bateman and the students

would walk the cliffs and discover some of the area caves.

"We would all disappear underground. I never counted the kids, so I have no idea if they came up or not. But I never got a complaint from a parent."

"I'm told you can't do that anymore," he says with a chuckle. "You need forms upon forms."

Adult supervision outside isn't necessary, says Bateman. Where parents should really be concerned is what goes on within

their homes, where children constantly tethered to electronic devices can be exposed to Internet predators, cyber-bullying and pornography.

"Where the kids need adult supervision is inside and that's not where it's happening," says Bateman, who still hikes twice a day when taking a break from painting in his studio on British Columbia's Salt Spring Island. "It isn't dangerous outside."

The idea of youngsters dis-

connecting from the electronic world and connecting with the natural world is the theme of a new children's book called *Under Your Nose*, which can be purchased from the Canadian Wildlife Federation. Bateman has contributed artwork to the book, as have a group of Muskoka-based painters known as the Tobin Island Artists (D. A. Dunford, Karen Genovese, Susan Gosevitz, Loretta Rogers, Darcey Sills, Megan Torisawa, and Si-

mon Dunford). Proceeds from the book go to the Bateman Foundation and the Canadian Wildlife Federation, Canada's largest charitable, notfor-profit conservation organization.

Bateman's relationship with the Canadian Wildlife Federation spans more than 35 years. Wade Luzny, the federation's CEO and executive vicepresident, describes it as a "long-lasting friendship and an endearing partnership" that has included a multitude of

education and art-in-nature programs, encouraging youth to get outdoors and discover the wonders of nature. In 2012, Bateman produced a painting called *The Moose Family* that was the inspiration for a series of commemorative coins by the Royal Canadian Mint to mark the 50th anniversary of the Canadian Wildlife Federation.

"In his public outreach, his teaching and his advocacy work, Robert has worked tirelessly to

ensure Canadians value the uniqueness of our wilderness and wildlife," says Luzny.

Dr. Bernie Gosevitz, chair of the Canadian Wildlife Foundation and a close friend of Bateman's, says the artist's drive to get young people to connect with nature is inspirational.

"It's a tough effort and he's throwing a lot of his own energy and money into it," says Gosevitz.

"He loves and is passionate about children. It's part of his

DNA. He cannot forget to be a teacher. He wants to see people reconnect with nature, especially children. If you don't get to that generation, our country is going to be ruined."

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ABOUT NATIONAL WILDLIFE WEEK

National Wildlife Week (April 5-11) is a leading Canadian Wildlife Federation initiative designed to connect Canadians with nature and pay homage to our country's natural heritage. NWW was established in Canada in 1947 to commemorate the achievements and contributions of Jack Miner, one of the first conservationists to det