

WSI-I-KEM : GATEWAY TO PARADISE

SHOAL HARBOUR MIGRATORY BIRD SANCTUARY

(A brief history by James K. Finley, Caretaker, Important Bird Area)

The very first glimpse, and the very last impression, of Vancouver Island for millions of residents and tourists alike is a beautiful little lagoon called Wsi-i-kem. As they hurry to and from the Swartz Bay ferry terminal in North Saanich, most do not realize they are bypassing a little piece of paradise. The scenery is marred by highway signs advertising the Wine Route and the ferries, and the landscaping has been badly neglected along Canada's number one highway and the Trans-Canada biking trail. The lagoon is obscured by an unsightly thicket of Scotch broom which, for once, has a useful purpose in maintaining the tranquility, protecting a rare intertidal plant community and limiting disturbance of the Green-winged Teal, that thrive on the rich tidal mudflats. There is no indication that we are looking at the historical area of Wsi-i-kem (referring to its clay substrate), the original home of the Coast Salish, and that we are also looking at one of the oldest wildlife sanctuaries on the Pacific Coast, the final stomping grounds of one of Canada's most notorious naturalists, John Macoun.

When the "Professor", John Macoun, Chief Botanist of the National Museum, retired to Sidney in 1912, he was one of the most renowned scientific figures in Canada, famous for his botanical explorations of the prairies and his dismissal of Palliser's Triangle as an obstacle to the settlement of the prairies. He was a naturalist in the old sense, self-taught, alert to all life. He and his son, James, had just completed the first Catalogue of Canadian Birds, a monumental task, but the indefatigable Professor had no intention of retiring. At age 81, his life as a free naturalist had just begun, in the paradise of W'Saanich (Saanich) and Wsi-i-kem. Within a year of his official retirement, his accomplishments were nothing short of astounding : he had collected 247 species of fungi, 128 species of lichen, 31 species of liverworts, 700 species of flowering plants, and 195 of the known 264 species of island seaweed. In 1914, he wrote " I mean to commence a more extensive system of field work." and when he suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right arm, he taught himself to write with his left hand, and continued to document the local flora of the Saanich peninsula.

In his last correspondence, dated June 28, 1920, to Dr. Newcombe, curator of the provincial museum, he thanks him for sending two specimens of *Godetias*, and in his last nature column, written under his nom de plume " The Rambler", he credits Dr. Newcombe for *Godetia caurina* (Wild *Godetia*), # 259 on his growing list of the Wild Flowers of Saanich. Ever the optimist he wrote " Our collectors are

doing so well that by autumn we will be able to show that North Saanich has more than half the total known species as yet found on the Island. ... Before we are through we will show that Professor Stevenson and **Professor Macoun are only attempting to tell what nature had done for Saanich** before the advent of man. "No shrinking violet, he let it be known that "our little list for this little district. Being founded on fact, it will remain while more ambitious ones will be forgotten. Facts always remain, while fine writing, after perhaps serving a given purpose, is heard of no more."

Many of his specimens came from the shores of Wsi i-kem, including Specimen 142 *Triglochin maritima* (Arrow Grass), collected in the salt marsh by Jessie C. This species, along with *Triglochin concinna*, often associates with the rare intertidal plant community, *Jaumea carnosa*, one of the most extensive colonies of which is hidden, just over the unsightly hedge of Scottish broom. The Graceful Arrow Grass and the Fleshy *Jaumea* are both rare species, listed by the B.C. Department of Environment.

Unfortunately Professor Macoun was unable to complete his list. It ends at specimen 265, *Linaria cymbalaria*, Ivy, " a casual garden escape" (now known as a terrible invasive species), collected on June 28th. On July 18th he died peacefully in his sleep in his ninetieth year. He was buried, replete with honours, in Patricia Bay Cemetery, but a year later he was disinterred and removed to Ottawa for national recognition.

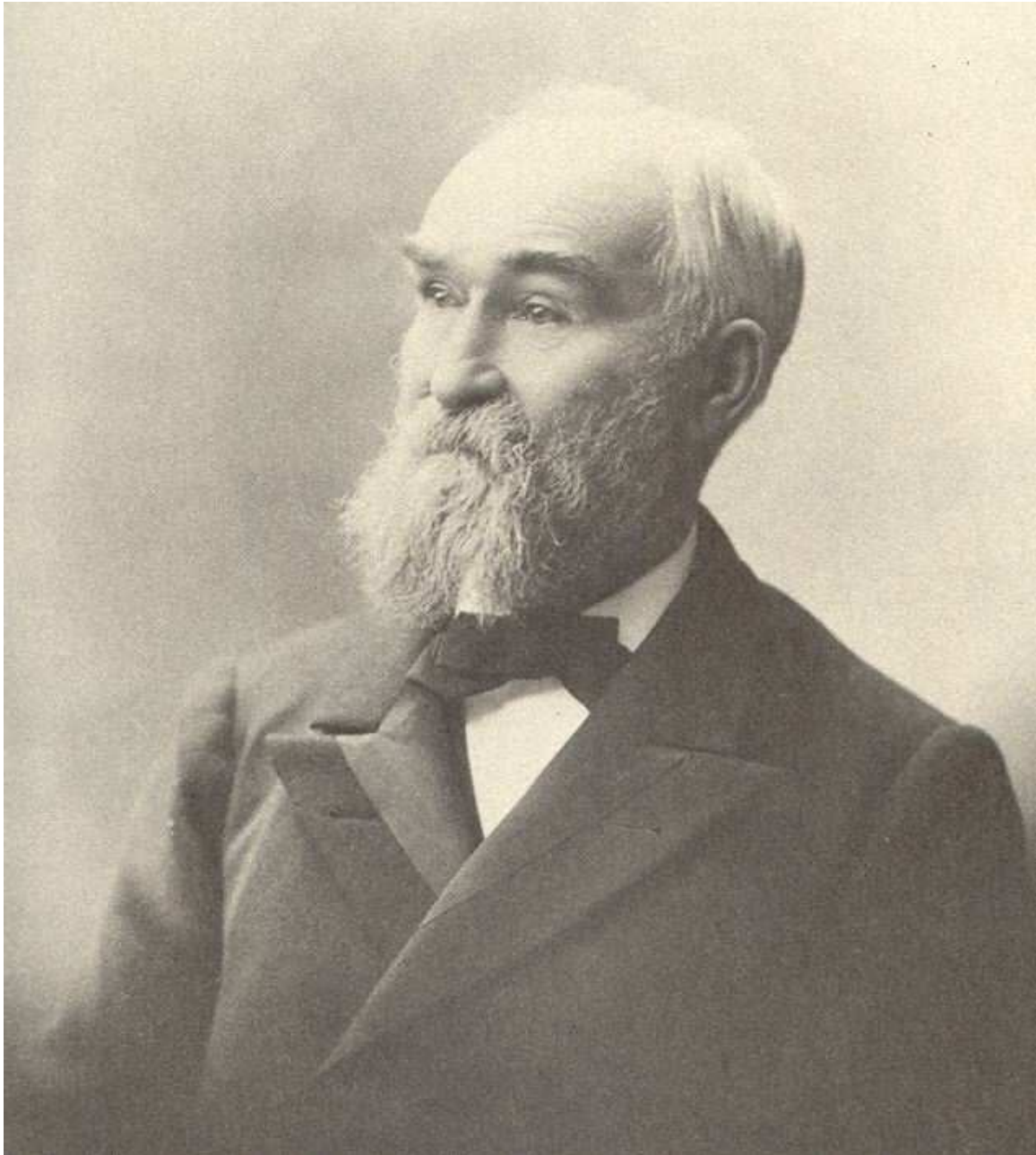
John Macoun was responsible for establishing the first migratory bird sanctuary in North America. Last Mountain Lake Sanctuary in Saskatchewan was established in 1887 as a result of his work. Macoun's legacy led to the establishment of a network of sanctuaries across the country and made Canada a leader in signing (and living up to) the terms of the Migratory Birds Convention Act of 1916. Shoal Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary was established in 1931 by an Order-in-Council of the Canadian government, and along with its sister sanctuary, Esquimaux Lagoon, they constitute the oldest marine migratory bird sanctuaries on the west coast.

In summarizing his monumental role in the history of the Canadian west, Professor Bill Waiser, in his definitive biography of this remarkable man, stated

"It is not too exaggerated to say that John Macoun tried almost single-handed to roll back the natural history frontiers of Canada."

On the historic occasion of International Migratory Bird Day, May 15, 2005, the citizens of North Saanich and Sidney gathered together in Lillian Hoffar Park, to celebrate the natural and cultural heritage that we share in Shoal Harbour (Wsi-i-kem) Migratory Bird Sanctuary. Over two hundred citizens, including Wsi-i-kem elders signed a proclamation that day, requesting that the District of North Saanich and the Town of Sidney give recognition and protection to the sanctuary,

and the legacy of John Macoun. This proclamation was followed up with a list of ten actions involving North Saanich, Sidney, the province of British Columbia and the government of Canada. We have a tremendous natural heritage to protect.



John Macoun