

Become an Owl Citizen Scientist



James Duncan with his education long-eared owl Rusty. Photo taken by Alex Cupeiro.

For 30 years, James Duncan has banded over 3,000 owls across Manitoba and is known as a global owl expert. Duncan runs a social enterprise called Discover Owls that promotes owl research, and conservation, all in the name of “simply making the world a better place,” says Duncan. According to Duncan, for the last 30 years, average citizens have been some of the most significant contributors to owl research.

The Manitoba Nocturnal Owl Survey(MNOS) is a yearly event in which all Manitobans are encouraged to gather data on Manitoba’s elusive owls. From late March to early April, the survey “provides essential information and had created a robust data set,” says Duncan.

The MNOS was started in 1991 by Duncan and his wife Patsy in Manitoba to cover a broader range of owl habitats. The couple coordinated the survey for 25 years before passing it off. However, Duncan assures that he will always be an active participant. The survey has become a national event replicated by each province now to gather data Canada-wide.

Participants of the survey go outside during the night and listen to owls hooting and record what they hear. Survey participants learn to differentiate the different owl calls, such as the barred owls barking call, the northern saw-whets too-too-too call and many others. The MNOS coordinators later go over the data after the survey has ended to check for patterns and any

inconsistencies. Duncan said that once, barn owls, a species not often found in Manitoba, have been documented accurately by citizens in the survey.

Duncan, his wife Patsy, and a few graduate biology students have been working on using MNOS citizen-generated results along with data collected on rodent populations. The purpose of this combination is to show that the results from the citizen-driven survey are accurate enough to be used and make a difference. Duncan says that “what we have seen shows that the data collected is accurate” and “can show people the work they do is valid.” Duncan says he plans to be publishing the paper within the next year, showing the correlation in data.

Citizen science, such as the MNOS, is essential for the future of conservation. According to Duncan, “engaging people is just as important as anything else that we can do for conservation.” Curious about why Manitobans participated in the MNOS survey, coordinators asked participants why they took part. Duncan said he was surprised but pleased to learn the number one reason was to have fun with family and friends.

If you are ready to become an owl researcher, grab your family and friends and head out to participate in the Whos Hooting survey this month. Perhaps you might even bump into Duncan and his wife Patsy, who will undoubtedly be out listening for owls.