

Official Opening Remarks: Manitoba Natural Resources

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished guests, owl biologists, ladies and gentlemen. I am very pleased to be with you today to officially open the Second International Symposium on the Biology and Conservation of Owls. I welcome you to Manitoba and bring greetings on behalf of our Premier, Gary Filmon, and the Honorable Glen Cummings, Minister of Natural Resources. As well, a special welcome to the delegates from Europe, Asia, the United States, and delegates from across Canada. We appreciate the effort you have made to come to Winnipeg and I hope your stay in our province and your participation in this symposium will be enjoyable and memorable.

Memorable is a key word for me as I harken back 10 years to the First International Symposium on the Conservation and Biology of Owls held at the Viscount Gort Hotel here in Winnipeg. There are many returnees here today who either actively participated in the program or who took a lead role in the organization and arrangements of that symposium.

A lot of dedicated work has gone into organizing this event and I congratulate everyone involved. I understand that the art display and auction being held during this symposium features contributions by Manitoba wildlife artists and photographers. They deserve thanks for supporting the symposium.

Manitoba is among world leaders in focusing attention on owls with these symposiums. As well and since the First Symposium, Manitoba has passed a provincial Endangered Species Act. As Chair of the Committee that recommends designations of threatened or endangered species under the Act, I am pleased to report that Manitoba has had to place very few raptors on the endangered or threatened list. For example, 11 of the 12 species of owls that occur in the province are relatively secure in their habitat and require no extra legal protection.

The exception is the Burrowing Owl. Not so long ago we had several hundred breeding pairs in southern Manitoba. This species has rapidly declined to just a few individuals in the extreme southwest corner of the province. In spite of considerable effort and resources to turn around the decline, we as managers have not even been able to hold the line on maintaining a viable population.

Although we have designated this owl as endangered in Manitoba, we still face a major challenge of recovering it or saving it from extirpation on the landscape. It is our hope that the special session on this Burrowing Owl at this symposium will provide further insight and new ideas from you on how to save this species.

On the brighter side, we are fortunate to have a substantial population of Great Gray Owls in Manitoba. Based on the research carried out by Dr. Jim Duncan of the Wildlife Branch, this species has been "down-listed" from vulnerable to secure in Canada.

We are also fortunate to have a Great Gray Owl with us today. "Lady Grayl", who—as some of you will recall - was present at the 1987 owl symposium, and will be 13 years old this coming May. This magnificent bird has been maintained by Dr. Robert Nero of our Wildlife Branch, for education, research, and fundraising. In addition to making numerous public appearances during our National Wildlife Week celebrations, Lady Grayl has given presentations in more than 150 schools throughout the province, thus capturing the hearts of many Manitobans. Bob assists her by driving the car!

Research studies and public relations work on the Great Gray Owl during the past 15 years by Bob Nero and his associates have brought this species into prominent public attention. There is little doubt that their efforts played a role in the selection of the Great Gray Owl as the official provincial bird emblem on 16 July 1987.

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We feel under a special obligation to ensure that Great Gray Owls, and all other owl species, are secure. I hope that this symposium, in bringing together some of the best collective wisdom on owls, will provide decision makers with the basis for achieving sound recommendations to conserve owl populations.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude to the several co-sponsors and contributors for their generous support that will make this symposium a success. It is with great personal pleasure that I now declare this second international symposium to be officially open.