

Stephen Hume: Top scientist lacked 'credentials'

Naturalist: The story of Glenn Ryder is a reminder not to confuse science with education

BY STEPHEN HUME, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST MAY 11, 2015

true



Panel of birds and flowers illustrating Glenn Ryder's field notes. Image from 'An Old-School Naturalist,' biography of B.C. naturalist Glenn Roderick Ryder. These are drawings from Ryder's voluminous field notes.

Photograph by: Handout

When Alexandra Morton was first drawing unwelcome attention to salmon farm aquaculture as a potential vector for parasite infestations and disease transmission to wild salmon, I was bombarded with critical emails citing her lack of an advanced science degree.

None of these condemnations addressed her science. They all fixated on her credentials. Morton was a registered professional biologist but had only a BSc.

However, she's also published 17 peer-reviewed research papers in the North American Journal of Fisheries Management, Science, the ICES Journal of Marine Science and the Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences and so on.

Those still condemning her lack of credentials should write this backwards on their foreheads with an indelible marker so that they can read it anew every time they look in the mirror: Science is a method,

not a credential.

Credentials attest that certain standards have been met at an institution. Credentials in themselves prove neither wisdom nor that the person holding them practises good science or even practises science at all.

A parliamentary committee questioned Morton about her credentials some years ago.

She replied: "This is how people attack me — with my credentials — but the science stands. It has now been replicated around the world by my colleagues from many universities."

That's the key, then. The science determines who is or is not a scientist, not credentials or the opinions of bloggers. This doesn't imply credentials are without value. They do indicate objectively evaluated knowledge. But educational credentials shouldn't be confused with science.

What got me thinking about this again is a small memorial biography published by the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies. It is about one of these remarkable citizen scientists who don't fit the conventional structure.

Glenn Roderick Ryder didn't attend a university. In fact, he never made it out of primary school. But when he died in 2013 he was acknowledged as the preeminent naturalist in British Columbia. His highly detailed and descriptive field notes take up more than 13 metres of shelf-space — "unparalleled for any naturalist in B.C. and possibly unequalled elsewhere," says his biographer, Wayne Campbell, associate editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Wildlife Afield*.

Ryder's beginnings were cruel. He was born in Vancouver at the end of the Great Depression. His father, still suffering the effects of First World War service, abandoned the family. His mother collapsed twice in starvation conditions — she'd been giving all her food to her three children — and he was apprehended by child welfare authorities.

He was placed at a Vancouver orphanage and then moved to a Penticton foster home. He was four. Before supper on that first day he'd seen birds on Okanagan Lake and distinguished 15 different species. His new foster parents were bird watchers. They turned over their reference books and a pair of binoculars.

Ryder studied the books and then went out and recorded 60 new species of birds. He started school — an eight kilometre walk — but was often distracted by wildlife and never got to class, his biographer says.

"He often arrived at the school house shortly after the students were settled for the day. He would 'borrow' a bicycle, pedal farther afield, and return it before the students were dismissed," Campbell says.

Like many a child in care, Ryder cycled through a series of foster homes, left school very early, and for the rest of his life remained true to his urge to observe and record the wildlife and habitats around him.

"This life is mine and I choose to spend a great deal of it walking in the woods as part of nature," he once told a friend.

For example, Campbell writes, searching old dumps for historic relics one winter, Ryder noticed and began recording the number and kinds of hibernating salamanders he found in old cans and bottles. "Some of these discoveries were new distributional and behavioural records for Long-Toed Salamander in B.C."

Ryder became an accomplished artist. He was a major contributor to the four-volume *The Birds of B.C.* published by UBC Press. He did field reports for the B.C. Parks Branch, served as a park warden and finally settled in the Central Fraser Valley.

When he died, his ashes were scattered on his beloved Sumas Mountain. His legacy is what Campbell describes as invaluable baseline information that can shed light on today's policy decisions regarding climate change, conservation, population trends and habitat protection.

All a reminder: Don't judge people by their credentials; judge them by what they do.

Anyone interested in the story of this unusual contributor to our knowledge of B.C. can obtain it from the Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies. Its webpage is www.wildlifebc.org

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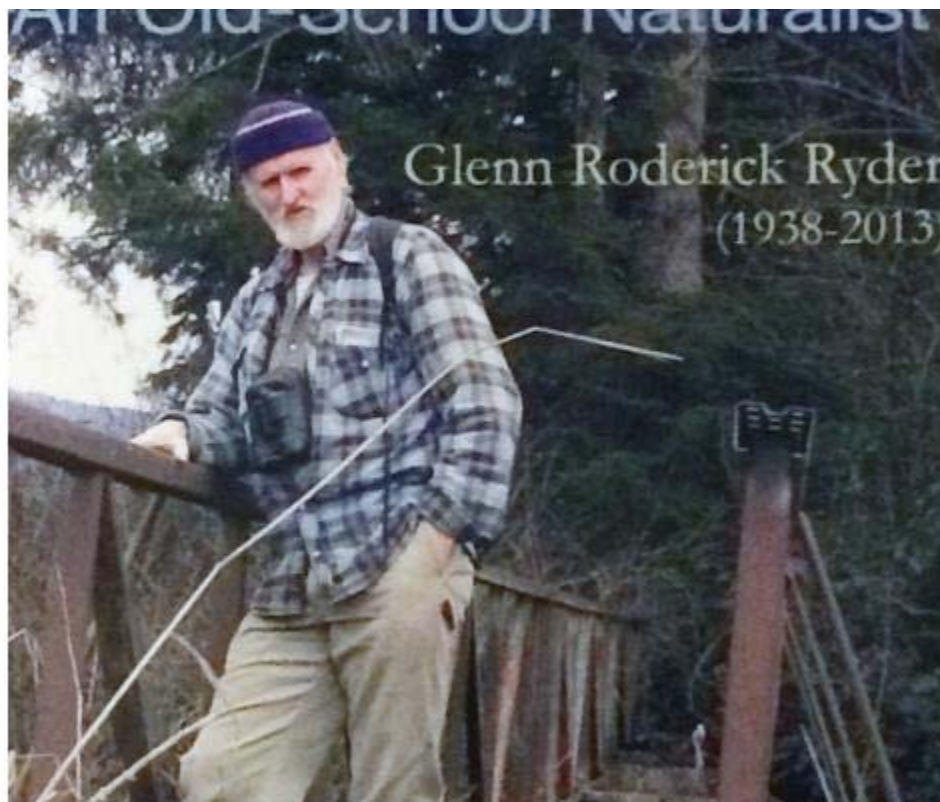
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Glenn Ryder, shown on the cover of his biography, didn't make it through grade school but made invaluable contributions to science.