

2020 Honorary Member: Robert G. Forsyth



Micro-snails from leaf litter sample, Ottawa region. Photo by R. Forsyth

This award is presented in recognition of outstanding contributions by a member or non-member to Canadian natural history or to the successful operation of the Club. Usually, people awarded an honorary membership have made extensive contributions over many years.

Gastropods could be considered one of the world's misunderstood group of creatures. It was once said "Most people dismiss them as slimy, slow-moving creatures seldom worth a second thought. Because they are small and reclusive, we seldom notice them, unless they become pests in our gardens." Historically this has been the situation in Canada. However, they include serious invasives, valuable prey, important predators, informative indicators, native species at risk, and potential sources of bio-products of great value to people.

Slugs or snails are not easy to identify, especially without experience. To successfully identify them, one must have the following: means to see the animal and its diagnostic structures (many are very small and difficult to see with the naked eye); an adult (diagnostic keys use adult characters and because juveniles do not have them, they cannot be identified); a steady hand when dissection is required for identification; literature; and, if you are lucky, some formal training. Because it takes a lot of work to master these organisms, it is understandable why so few people take on the task.

Robert Forsyth found them fascinating and challenging. Without his interest, we would not have a dedicated Canadian expert on this very important group.

Robert's knowledge of these organisms is vast, and his contribution to expanding our understanding of the Canadian mollusc fauna is extensive. He has authored, or contributed to, many scientific papers, several technical reports, COSEWIC reports, species assessment summaries, numerous popular articles, as well as two books.

The bulk of his work initially involved collecting and identifying molluscs from British Columbia. He has since worked on species in every province and territory. Throughout his studies, he has documented populations of native species, discovered new distributions and/or

range extensions/contractions, compiled checklists, and reported on new non-native and potentially invasive species. He has cooperated with more than 100 people while doing this work. Two books, *Land Snails of British Columbia* and *Identifying Land Snails and Slugs in Canada*, are excellent identification tools because they include keys to genera and species, distribution data, habitat and ecology information and lots of pictures and drawings. They have been proven so useful, that they are used routinely by federal inspectors when snails are found on imported and domestic goods. Many of his specimens can be found in the Royal British Columbia Museum and the New Brunswick Museum and serve as vouchers for mollusc research.

Robert was a member of Mollusc Species Specialist Subcommittee for the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada's (COSEWIC) from 2001 until 2020 and served as co-chair from 2007 to 2010. COSEWIC is responsible for providing a science-based status assessment of species found in Canada to determine if a species is at risk of extinction and the threats to their continued existence. It was his in-depth knowledge of Canada's terrestrial mollusc fauna that made him a valuable member of this organization for so long. All of the 20 terrestrial snails and slugs so far assessed by COSEWIC have been under his tenure while part of the subcommittee, including 17 that are at risk or are no longer found living in Canada. A status report on another terrestrial snail, confined to Cypress Hills in Saskatchewan and Alberta, is scheduled to be assessed in April 2021. However, his knowledge on molluscs extends far beyond just the terrestrials and includes freshwater as well as marine gastropods. Overall Robert has made a very significant contribution to the conservation of molluscs in Canada.

Robert also developed and maintains the website www.mollus.ca where people can find information on 22 families of slugs and snails found in North America and 44 non-native species. To date there are 69 posts featuring various species, all of which contain fantastic images. The website also provides useful keys to genera and species in Canada, information on how to collect specimens and where to donate samples collected.

He has been an OFNC member since 2000, but in 2019 he became the graphic artist/designer, responsible for the layout *The Canadian Field-Naturalist (CFN)* starting with volume 133. His formal training as a graphic and visual artist as well as his self-taught expertise on molluscs has resulted in his doing layout and technical editing for not only *CFN*, but for several international malacological journals.

Robert's extensive knowledge has made him an authority on terrestrial molluscs of Canada, and one of the foremost experts of its western fauna. His achievements are especially noteworthy, considering the difficulty of the group. What may be more astonishing is that his knowledge was acquired without any formal training. It has been through Robert Forsyth's interest and dedication to these fascinating, often unnoticed creatures that we have come to know so much more about one of Canada's least known faunal groups in a short period of time.

It is with pleasure that the OFNC awards Robert Forsyth Honorary Membership for his outstanding contributions to Canada's mollusc fauna.

*Prepared by Karen McLachlan Hamilton with input
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