

Gus Yaki (a video script)

By Alexandra Atienza

When an animal goes extinct, often, it's overlooked. Between 10,000 to 100,000 species depart Earth each year, and I feel guilty knowing I can't name over 5 of them. The habitats they once filled now hold an empty space. Their callings of roars or delicate chirps become a rare tune, similar to when a song on the radio used to play every day; but then disappeared, fading away with change.

Many naturalists mitigate ongoing complications like these, contributing to our environment or educating others in hopes of reducing that high exodus. One notable naturalist was situated here in Alberta; as he ultimately dedicated his whole life to nature not just in the province, but across the world.

On August 13th, 1932, Gus Yaki was born in a small town called Sandwith, located in Saskatchewan. It took only a few years after his birth for Yaki to discover his love for nature, triggered by his twice-a-day walks to school and back to his family farm. Birds met him along his path every day, which eventually encouraged him to study and identify the ones he saw while wielding a bird book given by his teacher.

From there, his love for nature blossomed, and of course, his interest wasn't stunted at only birds. From mammals to plants, all concepts of nature received Yaki's admiration. His ambitions for naturalism and birding drove him to undergo rigorous self-education on its principles and eventually join the RCMP, stationed in Ohsweken, Ontario.

During his time in Ontario, he got involved with environmentalist groups across the province. As the president of the Niagara Falls Nature Club, Gus believed that nature could bring strangers together, stating in the club's first newsletter that: "Although most of us do not know each other yet, we are here because we all have a common bond, and that is an interest in the natural world around us." It was unquestionably true-- as the club swiftly brought in 400 members within its first year of organization.

The growing influx of members guided Gus into acquiring a position with the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' board of Directors. He then became involved with the Nature Conservancy of Canada there, which prioritized land conservation. With them, he advocated for many causes, including his assistance in establishing the 900-km Bruce Trail; revered for being the longest marked and oldest hiking trail in Canada.

In 1972, Gus established Ontario Nature Tours, his own eco-tour company dedicated to putting experience and education over profit. The enterprise did nothing but grow, soon expanding worldwide with Gus as their educator. With his odysseys in Canada and across the

world, Yaki estimated that he had discovered about 5000 bird species, an exceptional amount that incorporates roughly 50% of the planet's bird variety!

1993 was when Gus had moved to Calgary after selling his company two years prior. Promptly after his arrival, he became involved in the city's environmental and conservation scene and secured high funds over time for it too, which comes as no surprise. With all his knowledge of nature, Gus was itching to share it with others and did so by leading botany field trips and birding expeditions for clubs like the Friends of Fish Creek Provincial Park Society for many years. In one memorable trip held on 2000's Victoria Day, Gus and a group of birders even discovered 116 species in one day.

Unfortunately, Gus passed away on August 10th, 2020 at 87, due to complications with pancreatic cancer. Before his diagnosis, he remained remarkably active even in his eighties. He acquired seven accolades including Calgary's "Top 7 Over 70" and the "Governor General's Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers" all in 2019, a year before his passing.

His consistent sharpness and diligence led many to believe that though he lived a long, fulfilling life, he had been taken too soon. Gus captivated all the children, avid naturalists, and the many others he met by investing them with his intelligence while being blessed with his seasoned sense of humor.

Yaki may have died, but his effect on naturalism never did. Many of his mentees have shared stories about him online, and have even taken steps toward a career in naturalism. Undoubtedly, Gus always shined a positive sunray of light. A light that reached me as well, even beyond his legacy.

(Impact on Self)

When I wandered outside, I searched the grasses and the skies in pursuit of birds to film for fragments of my presentation. Though I did meet and snap some along my path, I felt my search that day took longer than it could have compared to a few years ago; A time when parks felt like they were loaded with birds. Though the possibility of a deteriorating bird population was less likely, even the prospect of it scared me. Especially before getting to know Yaki on a more personal level, I wasn't making any changes FOR change.

Gus Yaki made a difference in his community by getting involved, caring for nature, and volunteering, something I'm capable of. I'm determined to give back to the people around me in numerous ways.

I have recently begun my volunteering opportunities by working as a Junior Leader at the Boys and Girls Club every week, where I take on roles of responsibility while displaying positive impacts on children. Someday these kids could be a puzzle piece in saving our world.

To contribute to my city environmentally, I plan on registering at Edmonton's Capital City Clean Up once I reach the required age in a few months. There, I will participate in organized community clean-up events, where Edmontonians gather to keep their city's grasses and sidewalks pristine, and their environment healthy. Every piece of trash picked up makes a difference.

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