

natural leaders

Now more than ever, the times call for public engagement and action to conserve our natural heritage. There is much to be done. And people from across the country are rising to the challenge, actively working to conserve wildlife

Across the country, record numbers are coming out to pull invasives from rights-of-way, clear clogged and littered waterways, ferry turtles across lethal expanses of roadway and join native plantings in support of pollinators. And more Canadians than ever are using their smartphones to become “community scientists,” contributing useful, actionable data about wildlife species numbers and distribution, deepening the perspective on local *and* global biodiversity.

The eight people honoured by CWF who are featured here in these pages (and the groups and organizations they are part of) are worthy representatives of this move outdoors. They represent tens of thousands more like them across the country who have decided to get involved.

CWF established the awards program in 1975 to recognize leadership outdoors. The program expanded each decade, and more than 180 awards have now been presented in total, acknowledging the various avenues driving positive

change — such as research, education, youth, arts and legislation. Today, with more than 800 species at risk of extinction in Canada, recognizing and supporting these efforts is more important than ever. Thankfully, there is hope.

Getting involved in a conservation cause of any kind is the most effective way most of us can contribute. Not only does the important work on the ground get done by you and others like you, but these grass-roots efforts drive environmental progress.

What's more, enthusiasm is catching: the actions of one volunteer inspire another who brings another. Conversations with family and friends bring more out. Awareness is raised. A community coalesces around an important hometown cause. Local businesses lend their support. The numbers grow. The benefits grow too: the river runs clear and fish thrive again, turtles cross the road safely and the pollinators have their corridors.

Our efforts to conserve local wildlife is important, rewarding work for the future.

Visit CanadianWildlifeFederation.ca to learn how you can make a difference in your community



BRIANNA ROYE

*Demiesha Dennis
is the 2025 Roderick
Haig-Brown Award
winner (see p. 34)*



WILD EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD

Billie Jo Reid

- WILD Education facilitator, Canadian Wildlife Federation
- Project WET coordinator and facilitator, Canadian Water Resources Association

WHAT THE NOMINATORS SAID

As a longtime WILD Education facilitator with the Canadian Wildlife Federation, Billie Jo Reid is a trusted collaborator. In the past few years alone, she has trained more than 100 educators in CWF’s Project WILD and Below Zero programs, including multiple cohorts of pre-service teachers at Brock University and the University of Calgary. Her professionalism and work ethic are unmatched, and she truly has become a rock, both for CWF and for others in the environmental educator community.

Love of nature is a defining aspect of Billie Jo. The moment you meet her, you can feel her passion, energy and joy. In fact, when it comes to environmental education, you could say that she herself is a true force of nature.

As a seasoned outdoor education professional with more than 25 years of experience in both formal and non-formal education settings, Billie Jo has a rare ability to connect people with nature. Her energy and passion for the environment are boundless, whether she is facilitating professional development training for teachers or leading a group of students on a nature-journaling walk. Her natural charisma comes from doing what she loves, and her interactive and innovative teaching style is infectious.

Billie Jo is a light. She shines bright and does not hesitate to share her light with others. A true ambassador for environmental education in her community and across Canada, she is highly deserving of this award.

IN HER OWN WORDS

Ever since I was little, I had a deep connection to the outdoors and loved spending time outside.

I love sharing my passion with others and helping them to find their own connection to the natural world. This is all the motivation I need to continue educating and protecting the environment.

Growing up, I spent a lot of time outdoors exploring with family and friends. The biggest catalyst was in high school when I was asked to be a part of the environmental leadership program run by Bill Mitchell in Madoc, Ontario. This is where I was introduced to Project WILD, Focus on Forest and Fishways. “Mitch” gave me the opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and try things I had never done before, including canoeing and canoe tripping.

Established in 2015, this award honours an exceptional WILD Education facilitator or instructor who provides innovative and meaningful experiences for youth that focus on wildlife and the building of a conservation ethic.

JOEL RODRIGUEZ



ROLAND MICHENER AWARD

Martin-Hugues St-Laurent

- Professor of biology and animal ecology, Université du Québec à Rimouski
- Chair of the Gaspésie Woodland Caribou Recovery Team
- Member of the external scientific advisory committee on conservation, Société des établissements de plein air du Québec
- Former member of the COSEWIC species specialist subcommittee on terrestrial mammals

WHAT THE NOMINATORS SAID

Since 2008, Martin-Hugues St-Laurent has led a research program on the impacts of natural disturbances and human disruptions on large mammal habitats and ecology. His research work, anchored in the forests of Quebec, focuses on the responses to habitat alteration and climate change of the Gaspé Peninsula’s two ecotypes of caribou, their competitors (moose, deer) and their predators (wolf, bear and coyote).

As a leader in wildlife management and conservation research for the past 17 years, his life’s work has been developing and guiding important conservation projects while working in close collaboration with First Nations representatives, government biologists and NGO conservationists.

Martin-Hugues has inspired many young biologists during his career, educating and mentoring innumerable graduate, doctoral and postdoctoral candidates. He has created a stable, safe and stimulating training environment, inspired by the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. Guided too by the practical realities of network building and engaging in conservation (and future employment prospects), he strives to connect his students with real-world partners, including local Indigenous Peoples, industry members, working conservationists and government officials. He places a strong emphasis at the undergraduate level on the recruitment of first-generation students and is willing to adapt projects to their abilities and needs.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

I grew up in Rimouski, a small town in eastern Quebec, and I spent many wonderful moments on the shores of the St. Lawrence River. I loved exploring the sandbanks with my grandparents, catching all sorts of invertebrates and small fish and beginning to understand how they live. My father often took me to the woods, where I learned about trees, birds and mammals. In short, my connection to wildlife stems from my roots in a small town surrounded by diverse natural habitats and from a deep curiosity ingrained in me to always learn more. Since then, I’ve studied biology and spent many summers (and winters!) in the field collecting data—living in nature throughout the seasons and sometimes harsh weather.

I love challenging myself to understand the complex mechanisms that link animal species to their environment. I am driven especially to identify solutions to supporting the sound management, recovery and conservation of mammals, so many of which hold a special place in Canada’s natural heritage. A career in conservation science is rewarding but can also be frustrating and exhausting. But we cannot give up. We must keep working to offer our science-based alternatives and solutions as we rethink our relationship with nature.

Today, more than ever, nature, wildlife and the environment need us to survive. Through our efforts to better understand the living world, we are working to unravel the mechanisms driving biodiversity loss and to identify plausible solutions to reverse these losses in order to protect the world’s rich and fragile natural heritage.

This award was established in 1978 by the Canadian Wildlife Federation as a tribute to the former governor-general of Canada, an outstanding outdoorsperson and past honorary president of the federation. It is presented to individuals who have demonstrated a commitment to effective and responsible activities that promote, enhance and further the conservation of Canada’s natural heritage.

GENEVIÈVE LESIEUR

WADE LUZNY YOUTH CONSERVATION AWARD

Green Herons

→ St. Catharines, Ontario

WHAT THE NOMINATORS SAID

I nominate the Green Herons for the Luzny youth award in recognition of their extraordinary dedication to environmental sustainability and conservation action. A youth education program, it provides conservation opportunities for young people across the Niagara region through projects that protect natural spaces and native species.

This passionate group of students aged 7-12, led by Lindsay Currie, has demonstrated an exceptional commitment to protecting wildlife habitat and fostering environmental stewardship. Their activities are exemplified in their video *Time for Action*, available on YouTube.

The group's efforts in raising awareness, leading grassroots conservation campaigns and organizing clean-ups have significantly improved local ecosystems and inspired others to act. In partnership with local and national environmental organizations, they have helped create many butterflyway gardens, native gardens and hundreds of native tree plantings. They spread their impact by distributing 800 native seed packs. The Green Herons are shaping the future of conservation in meaningful ways.

FOR THE GROUP

DANE CURRIE, AGE 12

When schools closed in 2020, my brother and I started a club to help the environment and learn about the species that live in southern Ontario. The day we were trying to come up with a name, we found a green heron in a local wetland. I drew a logo on a piece of cardboard, and our club was born. We followed Jane Goodall's Roots and Shoots program, which encourages youth to go outside, find problems the local wildlife face and do projects to fix them.

Nature has always been what I have been interested in since I can remember. Once you have some experiences up close with wildlife, the connection to the natural world just keeps getting stronger.

I would like to thank our community for helping to turn our club into what it has become today. We always had help from our parents, our neighbours, local businesses and the conservation authority when we had ideas for projects.

There's lots kids can do. Learn what wildlife exists in your neighbourhood. Or figure out what plants should be in your yard and which ones shouldn't. There are lots of organizations (and kids) you can connect with and learn from. When you look, you will find great people who are taking action in a lot of different ways. It's a great community to be a part of, and there is positive momentum happening everywhere right now.

This award recognizes youth or youth groups (18 and under) who have undertaken habitat and conservation projects or activities.



JOEL RODRIGUEZ

STAN HODCKISS CANADIAN
OUTDOORSPERSON OF THE YEAR

Adam Bienenstock

- Founder and president, Bienenstock Natural Playgrounds
- Member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Commission on Education and Communication and past director of the Child and Nature Alliance
- Advocate for inclusion, belonging and safety for everyone in outdoor spaces

WHAT THE NOMINATORS SAID

Adam Bienenstock is a fierce advocate of all children's right to nature play. For more than two decades, his company has created natural parks and playgrounds as well as outdoor classrooms. His professional and personal life is dedicated to connecting children to nature.

Adam is uniquely able to highlight the connections between soil and gut health, environmentally sound and regenerative landscapes, accessibility, equity, and the psychological and developmental benefits of time in nature. The logs, rocks and plants featured in natural playgrounds provide more sensory experiences, unlike playgrounds made of artificial materials.

Adam has worked on projects in every province in Canada and across the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia, designing and building 3,500 parks and playgrounds around the world. As the business has grown, he has expanded his efforts to raise awareness of the importance of nature to health, environmental sustainability and child development.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

Canoeing the rivers and lakes of northern Ontario very young, by 14 I was transfixed by the complexity of the landscape. Growing up in a UNESCO biosphere reserve, I was already very aware of how important this connection to nature was to me, how I used it to remain calm and centred in the midst of my chaotic academic family.

Growing up, our house was filled with mad scientists and brilliant researchers who took me under their wings and encouraged me to make connections.

These mentors, my father among them, launched my career. Dr. Fraser Mustard, co-author of 1999's seminal *The Early Years Study*—*Reversing the Real Brain Drain*, taught me about the importance of sensory connection for optimal child development and the key markers for cognitive and physical health. Dr. Jack Gauldie, an Olympic swimmer for both Canada and England and now a famous immunologist, taught me how to hold my breath for minutes, not seconds, by slowing my heart rate and altering my perception of time while lying on the bottom of the lake. My father, Dr. John Bienenstock (the father of mucosal immunology) taught me that my senses were a vector for macro- and microbiota that could change my mood and my perspective.

Since 1975, this award has been presented to a Canadian who has demonstrated an active and enduring commitment to conservation. It is named in honour of CWF's founding president.

ROBERT BATEMAN AWARD

Dale Poulter

- Longtime nature photographer and dedicated "community scientist"

WHAT THE NOMINATORS SAID

Dale Poulter's love of nature is captured in her stunning photographs and her careful studies of wildlife.

Her recent article, chronicling 40 years of observing common loons on Pike Lake, includes stunning and rarely seen images of close-up encounters with loons through all three of the seasons they spend in Canada.

A committed citizen scientist, Dale has photographed and documented more than 600 entries on iNaturalist.ca, including 400 "research-grade" photographs.

IN HER OWN WORDS

Connecting with nature is my passion. I feel peace and calmness in my life when in the outdoors. I feel my mind is connected with nature.

I am so grateful to Bart, my husband of 53 years, for his patience in listening to my latest exciting discovery and for helping me judge my photos—also, of course, for being there for me when I ask him yet again to come out to see something I found interesting.



To commemorate its 50th anniversary, CWF established this award to recognize those who, through artistic expression, have raised the awareness of and appreciation for Canada's wildlife and their habitats.



YOUTH MENTOR AWARD

Graeme Hopkins

- WILD Outside adult volunteer, former youth member
- Ocean Bridge program ambassador, Ocean Wise, October 2023 to March 2024
- Ocean Wise Eco-Action Accelerator program, May 2024 to October 2024
- 2024 Youth Climate Activism Award from the Institute for Sustainability Education & Action

IN HIS OWN WORDS

Nature has been a consistent fascination and escape for me throughout my life. My passionate and singular interest in paleontology began when I was very young and has not wavered since. My love for the study of fossils took me into the outdoors and introduced me to places I might never have visited otherwise. It has trained me to examine everything with curiosity and enthusiasm.

I live with autism spectrum disorder, and my life experiences of exclusion have inspired me to make every effort to welcome all youth to nature. Equity is not only a policy but a practice, making sure all feel safe and welcome. It is important to include youth of all backgrounds and identities, and engage speakers of diverse identities as session facilitators. We regularly collaborate with local Métis and First Nations individuals. As a lead of the Saskatoon Newcomer Youth Outdoor Adventure Club, I work directly with a diverse array of trained facilitators who have lived experience as new immigrants to Canada.

I am grateful for the Canadian Wildlife Federation's WILD Outside program as well as all of the volunteers and employees who made it possible. Ever since I became a participant in WILD Outside more than four years ago, the group has enabled me to maintain my connection to nature and nurture my love for life.

This award honours an individual who has made significant contributions in creating, presenting and encouraging conservation, habitat and other wildlife programs to Canada's youth.

DANEROY

NATHAN ELLSON

PAST PRESIDENTS' CANADIAN LEGISLATOR AWARD

Blaine Calkins

- Member of Parliament, Ponoka-Didsbury (formerly Red Deer-Lacombe) since 2006
- Chair of the Conservative hunting and angling caucus; shadow cabinet minister for hunting, fishing and conservation; member of the House of Commons committees on fisheries and oceans, and on the environment and natural resources

WHAT THE NOMINATORS SAID

Canada's first-ever shadow minister for hunting, fishing and conservation, Calkins has advocated for conservation through the lens of hunters, anglers and trappers. Calkins advocates for responsible firearms ownership as a critical part of hunting and Canadian culture and respect for lawful gun owners.

Prior to political life, Calkins worked as an Alberta park ranger and as a national park warden. While attending university, he spent his summers working on and around Great Bear Lake.

IN HIS OWN WORDS

I have been an outdoorsman my entire life. Growing up on the family farm, I spent almost all my time outdoors, surrounded by birds and wildlife. At an early age, my dad got me hooked on fishing, which then grew into a passion for the outdoors. I was keenly interested in the biological sciences while earning my zoology degree from the University of Alberta.

Keep fighting for the things you believe in, and don't let failure stop you. Failure is just an opportunity to find new and creative ways to succeed.



Honouring one of Canada's great writers and conservationists, this award is presented to an individual or group for making a significant contribution to furthering the sport of angling and the conservation, the development and the wise use of Canada's recreational fisheries.

Demiesha Dennis

→ Founder and director, Brown Girl Outdoor World

→ Advocate for inclusion, belonging and safety for everyone in outdoor spaces

WHAT THE NOMINATORS SAID

An accomplished angler, seasoned adventurer and passionate community advocate, Demiesha Dennis blends her love for the outdoors with her expertise to drive and foster substantial and positive change. She has become a dynamic leader and true trailblazer, fostering inclusivity and equity in the outdoors community.

Demiesha's work inspires, guides and motivates a new generation of outdoor enthusiasts and leaders to embrace and preserve the natural world.

Guided by her passion for being a voice that takes up and creates space in rooms where the representation of Black, Indigenous and racialized individuals remains under-represented, Demiesha serves on the advisory boards of several groups, including the Friends of Algonquin Park and the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters.

IN HER OWN WORDS

My connection to wildlife and nature is deeply rooted in my upbringing and the landscapes that shaped me. Growing up in Jamaica, nature wasn't something separate; experiencing it was part of daily life. My grandmother, Ethlyn Dennis, was my first mentor in nature. She taught me the names of trees and birds, how to read the weather to know when to plant and when to harvest. That shaped my connection to the land and continues to guide me today.

Moving to Canada 25 years ago forced me to learn new ways of engaging with the land while carrying the deep respect and reverence instilled in me from childhood. My presence in the natural world was the exception from the norm. That absence sent a message that belonging in nature had to be earned. I refuse to allow that narrative to continue existing and wholeheartedly refuse to let that be passed down.

I do this work today to ensure that more people, especially those who have been historically excluded, know that the responsibility of knowing, loving and protecting the natural world is a gift. I want to leave a legacy that sees a collective of humans who decided that this planet was worth saving and decided to do the work.

Honouring one of Canada's great writers and conservationists, this award is presented to an individual or group for making a significant contribution to furthering the sport of angling and the conservation, development and wise use of Canada's recreational fisheries.

