



In Memoriam

William James (Bill) Merilees Naturalist and Malacologist

1940-2025

We sadly report the passing of Bill Merilees, June 18, 2025. Bill was a lifelong naturalist and a good friend to several shell club members. He was generous with his time and knowledge. From the time Bill joined our club, he began contributing articles to *The Dredgings*, ultimately numbering 35. Bill wrote with a sense of wonder about diversity, natural curiosities, range extensions and habitat information. Bill participated in several field trips and had fashioned a small dredge for collecting trips in his local BC waters. Bill donated some of his special extra specimens to the club for our auctions.

Bill's interest in natural history began at a young age. He joined the Vancouver Natural History Society as a junior member in 1953. It was a prize for getting his Naturalist badge as a Boy Scout. He later received his Bachelors degree from UBC in Zoology and Botany in 1964. He spent time traveling and working with friends, including working as a biologist on Macquarie Island in Australia. After his marriage to June in 1968, Bill returned to BC and worked in a teaching position at Selkirk College. In 1974 he earned a Masters in Recreational Resource Management from Colorado State. He started working with Parks Canada in 1975 and then joined BC Parks in 1978 where he remained until he "retired" in 1996.

Bill was actively involved with the Nanaimo Field Naturalists Club since the 1970s and was eventually honored with a lifetime membership for all his contributions to the club and the environment. Bill was also very involved with the Vancouver Natural History Society and held the office of president from 1988-1990. He later held the office of Vice-President of the Federation of BC Naturalists (BC Nature). From BC Nature he received two prestigious awards: in 1980 the Elton Anderson Award and in 2015 the McTaggart-Cowan Outstanding Naturalist Award. He also received the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal for Canada in 2003 for his work in nature education.

Many members were probably unaware of the breadth of his interest in natural history beyond molluscs. Bill was well-versed in terrestrial flora and fauna as well. Through his work in the many organizations to which he belonged, he encouraged bird counts, published hiking maps, campaigned against offshore oil drilling, aided and initiated many conservation programs and studies to establish habitat reserves. He even spent a few seasons acting as the onboard naturalist on cruises visiting Antarctic waters. His travels took him all over the world.

Bill authored several books of interest to naturalists including "Attracting Backyard Wildlife" (Whitecap, 1989), "Newcastle Island: A Place of Discovery" (Heritage House, 1998), "The New Gardening for Wildlife" (Whitecap, 2000), and co-authored "Trees, Shrubs and Flowers to Know in Washington and British Columbia" (Lone Pine, 1996). He also authored numerous articles for a number of nature publications, including our club newsletter.

In the field of malacology Bill had a particular interest in micro-molluscs, those under 1 cm in size. He documented more than 300 molluscan species from over 650 samples collected. His collections ranged from northwest Washington state throughout the outer and inner coast of BC waters to Haida Gwaii. His concentration on the tiny specimens represented juvenile shells to adult micro-species giving us a specialized picture of habitats often overlooked. His collection of about 150,000 specimens was donated to the Beaty Biodiversity Museum at UBC in 2021. This was reported in *The Dredgings* Vol. 63 No.1, 2023.

Bill frequently corresponded with experts and sent shell specimens for study. One snail sample was determined to be a new species of *Falsicingula*. Jim McLean at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County concluded that this was a new species, and proposed the name *Falsicingula merileesi* n. sp. This work, however, is yet to be published. A number of Bill's specimens were sequenced for BOLD, the Barcode of Life database. His specimens represent 40 sequences from 8 families and 13 species. Five specimens from his collections are the only data for those species in BOLD.

We will miss Bill. He loved exploring the intertidal areas and would lend a ready hand when pulling up a dredge. His enthusiasm for everything in nature was infectious and never wavered. Even as his health declined in the last few months, he was still traveling to a local lake to observe and make notes on the turtle population.

A Celebration of Life will take place July 19, 2025, which would have been Bill's 85th birthday.

<https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/nanaimo-bc/william-merilees-12426425>