

Memories and Reminiscences of Dr. George Argus

Compiled by Deborah Metsger

It was with great sadness that botanists across the country learned the news of George Argus' death on October 21, 2022, at the age of 93. A retired research scientist from the Canadian Museum of Nature, George was a world-renowned expert on the genus *Salix* (Salicaceae) and one of Canada's foremost botanists. In 1991 he was awarded the CBA/ABC Lawson Medal, Category A in recognition of his outstanding achievement with respect to the Rare and Endangered Plant Program at the Canadian Museum of Nature. A full write-up on his Lawson Medal is available in [Vol. 24\(4\) of the CBA Bulletin](#).

George Argus was also legendary within the mountaineering community as a survivor of the first successful ascent of Mt. Denali (McKinley) via the South Buttress route in 1954, which ended with a tragic descent and subsequent rescue. The story, recounted in numerous articles as well as the critically acclaimed book "Forever on the Mountain" by James M. Tabor, 2008, is nicely summarized in [this Alaskan tribute article](#). George frequently shared his story of Denali, as witnessed in the tributes below.

George's long-time friends and colleagues Ernie Brodo and Erich Haber have prepared an extensive tribute to his life, career, accomplishments, and honours for the Canadian Field Naturalist: [A tribute to George William Argus, 1929–2022. Canadian Field-Naturalist 136: 284-292](#). Rather than repeat that information here, we have chosen to share a series of short tributes, stories and anecdotes from others within the botanical community who worked with or crossed paths with this remarkable man.



George Argus in his element

Remembering George Argus: a phenomenal mentor

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA, or "The Act"), designed to protect critically imperiled species from extinction in the United States, was signed into law by President Richard Nixon. That same year, the Systematics and Phytogeography Section of the Canadian Botanical Association (CBA) formed a subcommittee on Rare and Endangered Species in the Canadian Flora. By this time, George Argus, a member of the subcommittee, had already successfully initiated an independent attempt to compile a national list of the rare plants of Canada by enlisting the cooperation of botanists from across the country. Ten years later (1983), still fresh out of my M.Sc. degree on ferns from the Univ. of Guelph, I managed to land a position at the Canadian Museum of Nature working with George Argus on the *Atlas of the Rare Vascular Plants of Ontario*. What a lucky break for me!

I thoroughly enjoyed contributing species sheets to the *Atlas* and helping George co-edit Parts 1-4 of the 1982-1987 edition of the *Atlas*. At that time, George would start work at the Museum before 7am, but he never admonished me for preferring to show up at 10am, just in time for the Botany Division's infamous morning tea break. George would head home around 4pm and I would work until 7pm. Despite our schedules being somewhat out of sync, we soon developed a robust rhythm of working together. It was a joy to come to work each day knowing that George already had a 3-hr jump on me, and that with a big smile he would hand me a slate of things to work on. Then after he left, I would prepare a similar slate of questions for him to follow up on before I arrived. And so, it went...

Following the publication of the *Atlas* (Argus et al., 1982-1987), we immediately set to work on compiling data for the national list of Canadian rare plants. Those were heady days—busy with transposing years of hard



Standing, from left: Mike Shchepanek, Michel Poulin, George Argus, Bob Ireland, Barbara Kobolak, Albert Dugal, Kathleen Pryer. Seated or kneeling, from left. Pak Yau Wong, Erich Haber, Irwin Brodo, Alice Lett, Linda Ley.

copy data contained in scores of binders into our new-fangled computer database. On Christmas Eve in 1987, as we were wrapping up the project, our entire 2MB database, containing information on more than 1000 rare species, completely vanished in a computer crash. It was such a blow! George and I could not imagine starting all over again from scratch. Miraculously, a month later, a local computer company called SYNERSYS, through the expert work of Terance and Timothy Mahoney, managed to rescue all our data. Without their help, Argus and Pryer (1990) would not have seen the light of day. Incidentally, I just checked online, and that company still exists today! I know that George would join me in giving them our heartfelt thanks and best wishes, 35 years later!

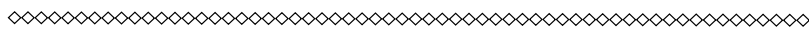
Working with George was fun and always enlightening. Every day he lived up to the motto

given to him by his own mentor Hugh Raup: “*Whatever you do in life it should be fun, and as soon as it stops being fun, stop doing it*”. That also became my motto, and a good rule of thumb for choosing subsequent mentors along the way. George was always a good listener and a quick and articulate thinker to bounce ideas to. George was always kind and enthusiastic about helping me to achieve my goals, and I am indebted to him for all that he taught me. George will always be dearly missed.

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Literature Cited

Argus, G. W., K. M. Pryer, D. J. White, and C. J. Keddy. (Editors). 1982- 1987. Atlas of the rare vascular plants of Ontario. Parts 1-4. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa.
Argus, G.W. & K. M. Pryer. 1990. Rare vascular plants in Canada. Our natural heritage. Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa. 191 pp.



Remembering George Argus: A man with limits and many talents

My first encounter with George Argus was on a CBA/ABC pre-conference fieldtrip to Eastern New Brunswick in late June 1984. It was a three-day fieldtrip led by Hal Hinds and H. Harrier that explored a myriad of inland and coastal habitats from Fredericton to the Bay of Fundy, to Kouchibouguac National Park and back. With many keen botanists along—Eric Haber, Paul Maycock, Steve Varga and more—it was a marvelous trip, except that it rained for two days straight. Everyone was soaked from slogging through bogs and marshes in the rain. By the end of the 2nd day George went on strike, parking himself, legs out-stretched on a back seat of the bus while others ventured out into another downpour! On Tuesday afternoon of the conference-proper, there was a field trip along the St. John River in Fredericton to view rare plants. As reported in the CBA Bulletin summary of the conference “*The Tuesday afternoon field trips were notable for another reason — the torrential downpour! Intrepid botanists enjoyed them all and dried off later.*” Well, not all did! George Argus had no appetite for botanizing in the mud again, even to see a nationally rare plant! Instead, he and I went to view the quilt show at the Fredericton Art Gallery, then spent the afternoon touring the streets of Fredericton finding fabric stores, coffee shops and craft stores. I learned that George was an accomplished sewer and smocker, making all his own country dance