

About Grace Bell

Grace Bell and the Royal BC Museum

Grace Bell was a pioneer in bird song recording. She lived from 1900 to 1986. Dr Clifford Carl, a marine biologist, was director of the BC Provincial Museum (now Royal BC Museum) from 1942 to 1969. Dr Carl saw how Grace's passion and technical skill could be used to create a valuable library of British Columbia bird songs for the museum. His foresight to preserve Grace Bell's work has made it possible for today's generation of bird lovers to enjoy the recordings from the Grace Bell collection at the Royal BC Museum.

A Letter from Grace

The following are excerpts from a letter Grace Bell wrote to her grandson when she was 82 years old, in 1982. It gives us some insight into who Grace Bell was. Also, in her own words, Grace Bell tells how she began recording bird songs.

It all began when my husband's brother Richard sent us a tape recorder ... and I found another use for the tape recorder – recording the birds singing from all over the place in the garden.

It was easy, just open the window enough to hold the microphone firm and steady. Then with earphones on and being at the ready by the recorder – I had my first thrilling moments of hearing recorded bird sounds. It was an exciting moment, of which I shared with Howard and my father who encouraged my hope for a future in wildlife recording. From then on life changed beautifully!

One day while reading a nature magazine I came upon an article about recording sounds of nature. It was about a man named Dr W.W.H. Gunn who knew a great deal about recording bird songs. From the article he hoped more people would become interested in the occupation and find out how satisfying the entire study of birds could be. I wrote him and had an interesting and encouraging reply. He sent me a record he had made of his bird songs. Dr Gunn's encouragement opened the way wider for me, in the ambition that grew more every day.

Coincidentally enough, it turned out that my husband Howard and Dr Gunn knew each other while in the army. When Dr Gunn came out to British Columbia he delighted us by staying at our home and going out for a bit of recording with me. That was a mighty good chance for me to learn more about the techniques of bird recording.



Grace Bell

Dr Gunn had two Nagra tape recorders [a kind of portable sound recorder]! To my excitement he left one with me to try out. This was a dream to me!

Dr Clifford Carl, Director of the British Columbia Provincial Museum, was behind everything that advanced. The idea of creating a library of bird sounds for the museum thrilled me and drove me on. And so it went for me. I was soon able to buy a Nagra myself from Dr Gunn – one of the finest recorders in the world. It was hard to believe that I could go out between four and five o'clock in the morning taking my very own Nagra with a 40 inch parabolic reflector strapped to the roof of my car and set up along some pleasant country lane and record beautiful sounds of birds. My wish had come true!

Running into someone today with a stack of recording equipment would not seem too out of the ordinary. However, in the 1960s going out with recording equipment to capture bird songs was quite unusual. Many people at that time had not even seen a tape recorder, let alone a large parabolic microphone strapped on top of a car.

Note: Grace Bell was doing her recording at the height of the Cold War, when spy movies featuring James Bond were all the craze. Mrs Bell, with her tape recorder and large parabolic reflector, was often looked upon with much suspicion!