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# Gus Yaki:

## AWA Wilderness Defender

By **Brittany Verbeek**

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Walking an hour to grade school from his family's farm thirty-five miles north of North Battleford Saskatchewan, little Gus Yaki had time to let his mind wander and nurture his curiosity about the natural world around him. "I observed the many flora and fauna along the way and began recognizing them without knowing their names," Gus said. As he recalled trips he had done later in his life to East Africa with its unbelievable diversity and richness of species – I couldn't help but think perhaps those walks as a child held the same fascination and wonder. His time spent in rural Saskatchewan set the foundation for what would become Gus's life-long passion for wildlife. And one thing I have learned about Gus in the short time I have known him is he has a tremendous ability to turn any location into a fascinating natural history lesson.

His first taste of Alberta was a six-month stint in Edmonton, waiting to turn eighteen before the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) could enroll him into the force. After his acceptance into the RCMP, Gus trained for nine months in Regina instead of the usual six months because his squad



*Gus Yaki and his "class" at AWA's Summer Kids Camp*  
PHOTO: © C. OLSON

was selected for a special task. It was 1951. The then Princess Elizabeth, now the Queen of England, and Prince Phillip were touring Canada and Gus's RCMP squad was required to perform a fifteen minute physical training session for the royals. "My specialty was to do fifty back flips!" Gus recalled with a chuckle. He said he would break his back attempting to do one now, but as a young

man he succeeded this acrobatic marvel. That's not to say he doesn't still do metaphorical back flips when he spots a rare bird or wild flower during his many outings.

After two and a half years of service in the RCMP, he worked for several other organizations in Ontario including Trans Canada Airlines (now Air Canada) and General Motors Canada. However, no matter where Gus lived or what he was doing, his love of nature never wavered. In the 1960s Gus lived in Lindsay, Ontario where he was President of the Victoria County Nature Club from 1962 to 1964. When he moved to Niagara Falls and realized there was no nature club there, he began one. Within one year they had over 400 members, which got the attention of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON). Soon he was a member of FON's Board of Directors, and eventually was contracted to work for them. One of his assignments was to run their outdoor trip program. This led to him starting up Nature Travel Service, Gus's own eco-tour company. Over the span of thirty years running tours, he personally visited over seventy countries. When asked his favorite place he replied

very politically “whatever place I happened to be at the time.”

Gus met his wife Aileen on one of his international trips. They have shared the joy of nature’s best treasures with each other, and many others, throughout the years. Upon his retirement in 1993, he moved to Calgary where Aileen had lived since 1950. Gus quickly became involved with Nature Calgary. About ten years ago, he started a series of 12-week spring, autumn, and winter birding sessions for the Friends of Fish Creek Provincial Park Society. What started as one group of twelve participants, grew to become twenty-one groups of over 240 participants by last spring. These course participants faithfully come out once a week as Gus and his assistants lead them through different natural areas within the city. “I technically retired 21 years ago but most of my days are filled with an outing in the morning, often a visit to a school classroom in the afternoon, and giving a slide show or attending various meetings in the evenings. I also spend a lot of time answering nature-related questions sent by email.” He remains a very busy and much sought after man.

Surprisingly Gus never had a formal post-secondary education in biology or any related fields. His seemingly endless biological knowledge is both self taught and also learned informally from various par-

ticipants, including participating professors and other experts, on his many trips. Although he himself is an inspiration, Gus told me of several people or naturalists that have made an impression on him over his lifetime. The first was one of his teachers, Kathleen Nouch, who owned a small bird book “which she generously allowed us to peruse at recess time.” The second inspiration appeared in 1942, when a Yorkton, Saskatchewan woman named Isabel Priestly inspired the very first newsletter publication of “The Blue Jay.” A modest nature-related quarterly production, costing 25 cent a year back then, has now celebrated over 60 years of publication and can be found in reference libraries all across North America and abroad. Gus has every single issue. Helping to produce those first issues was Dr. Stuart Houston, now a retired radiologist in Saskatoon, and author of the soon-to-be published, two-volume, *Birds of Saskatchewan*. Bruce Falls is another of Gus’s personal inspirations. As a professor of biology at University of Toronto and president of Federation of Ontario Naturalists, he led the way to the establishment of the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Roger Tory Peterson, author of the first modern field guide “A Field Guide to the Birds,” and Robert Bateman, world-acclaimed wildlife artist and activist – have both greatly impressed Gus. Both have been

participants and/or co-leaders on his tours.

Gus Yaki, without mention or fanfare, deserves to share the stage with these other environmental champions. His entire life has been dedicated to learning and experiencing the natural world, sharing his wealth of knowledge, and inspiring others to value the wonders of Earth’s biological systems. “Unless people learn to love and appreciate the natural world around them, they are not going to stand up to protect it.” He is driven to teach people what species we have already lost and what humans stand to lose if we continue on this path to less and less biodiversity.

I’m sure with his passion, persistence and good-natured personality that everyone who has met Gus has a favourite story to tell – one that makes you smile! I have only personally known him for the past year since I began with AWA but my favourite ‘Gus moment’ was during a nature walk he led for the children participating in AWA’s summer kids’ camp in August. We didn’t have to go far for the kids to be amazed at every plant, bug and bird that we came across. When we returned to the building, he announced to us all that it was his 82nd birthday. He leaned over and said to the kids, “If you go out for walks in nature every day, like I do, you will reach the age of 82 like me!” 🍌

## Lisa Kozokowsky - Featured Artist



Oasis, 60x20, encaustic/oil, PHOTO: © LISA KOZOKOWSKY