



Irene Mclveen, Nature Artist

By Eli Mclveen

With endless patience and a keen eye, naturalist and illustrator Irene Mclveen took pleasure in capturing the tiniest details in her art: the delicate silk of a milkweed seed, the veins of a fallen leaf, the fringe of a moth's wing. The images shown here are part of her series of watercolours depicting plant life in all four seasons. Irene spent much of her life exploring and documenting the flora and fauna of the Niagara Escarpment.





▲ Painting with a charm reminiscent of Beatrix Potter, Irene McIlveen was a serious naturalist. Names are listed from left to right in each page of paintings. Specimens recorded on this page are noted as: Winter – Old fields: *Clinopodium vulgare* (Field Basil); *Linaria vulgaris* (Butter-and-eggs); *Dianthus armeria* (Deptford Pink); *Anaphalis margaritacea* (Pearly Everlasting); *Diastrophus turgidus* (Raspberry Gall on Raspberry stem); *Solanum dulcamara* (Climbing Nightshade); *Rubus idaeus* ssp. *strigosus* (Wild Red Raspberry); *Blarina brevicaudata* (Northern Short-tailed Shrew).



Nature artist Irene McIlveen passed away in June 2017 after a long illness. She was born in Brampton in 1949, the youngest of five children. Her parents, Hanako and Hiko Hamada, had emigrated from Japan in the 1920s, and made their

way to Ontario following the Japanese-Canadian internment of World War II. They settled in the farm country near Huttonville, west of Brampton. There, Irene eventually met her husband-to-be Bill, whose family had come to Canada from Scotland when he was a young boy.

After her early education at Huttonville Public School and Bramalea Secondary School, Irene's love for art and illustration led her to attend Sheridan College. For some years she worked as a graphic designer, first in Toronto, then as a technician at Sheridan, and then in State

College, Pennsylvania, where Bill was pursuing his PhD in plant pathology. After I was born, we lived for several years just north of Sudbury. We moved to the Escarpment near Acton in 1986, where Irene would spend the rest of her life watching, drawing, photographing,



▲ Irene in 1969.

◀ Late Fall and Winter – Fields, wood edges: *Asclepias syriaca* (Common Milkweed); *Vitis riparia* (Riverbank Grape); *Echinocystis lobata* (Wild Mock-cucumber); *Centaurea jacea* (Brown Knapweed); *Monarda fistulosa* (Wild Bergamot); *Achillea millefolium* (Common Yarrow).

and monitoring the region's wildlife.

As a stay-at-home mother, she continued to draw, paint and craft. Her work was hampered, however, when she suffered kidney failure and was forced to go on dialysis on a regular basis. Eventually, the installation of a home

dialysis machine reduced her need to travel to the hospital, but displaced her art studio.

Nature Sketchbooks

After a kidney transplant in 1988, she was able to return to her art, and honed her skills with ink and watercolours. She filled dozens of sketchbooks

with observations of plants, fungi, birds, insects and other animals. Even on walks around the garden, she kept a pill bottle in her pocket in case she came upon an interesting beetle or moth to take back to the house. Visitors were occasionally startled to discover a bottle



◀ Winter – Pond:
Typha angustifolia
 (Narrow-leaved
 Cattail); Insect egg
 casings on Cattail
 leaf; *Salix* sp. (Willow
 sp.); *Rabdophaga*
strobiloides (Willow
 Pine Cone Gall on
 willow); *Viburnum*
opulus (Highbush
 Cranberry).

or two in the refrigerator, while Irene waited for the insect inside to cool and slow down enough to draw or photograph before releasing it.

Along with Bill, she was an active member of many organizations including local naturalist clubs, the Field Botanists of Ontario,

the Toronto Entomological Association, the Mycological Society of Toronto, and the Waterloo-Wellington Wildflower Society. Her fellow naturalists fondly recall her warmth and willingness to share her knowledge. On walks, Irene always trailed behind,

looking for hidden plants, animals and other organisms to show to the group. She would often supplement the on-site discoveries with some interesting item brought from home.

Irene's mother Hanako was a poet, writing under the pen name Nagijyo Hamada,

and in 1989 published a haiku collection entitled Yukino ("Field of Snow"), with cover illustrations and frontispiece by Irene. Her poems depict images and memories from her decades of life in the Ontario countryside.



◀ Winter – Old fields: *Solidago altissima* (Tall Goldenrod) three stems with galls: *Gnorimoschema gallaesolidaginis* (Elliptical Goldenrod Gall) – moth; *Eurosta solidaginis* (Goldenrod Ball Gall) – fly; *Rhopalomyia solidaginis* (Goldenrod Bunch Gall) – midge; *Plantago lanceolata* (English Plantain); *Dianthus armeria* (Deptford Pink); *Anemone virginiana* (Virginia Anemone); *Hypericum perforatum* (Common St. John's-wort); *Daucus carota* (Wild Carrot); *Plantago major* (Common Plantain).



▲ Late Fall and Winter – Open fields: *Oenothera biennis* (Common Evening-primrose); *Verbascum thapsus* (Common Mullein); *Tanacetum vulgare* (Common Tansy); *Erigeron philadelphicus* (Philadelphia Fleabane); *Agrimonia* sp. (Agrimony sp.); *Geum aleppicum* (Yellow Avens); *Inula helenium* (Elecampane).

雪野行く引き返せねば何処までも

yukino iku hikikaeseneba
dokomademo

*A path through the snow
will go on forever
if one never looks back.*

川上にふるさとがある天の川

kawakami ni furusato
ga aru ama no kawa

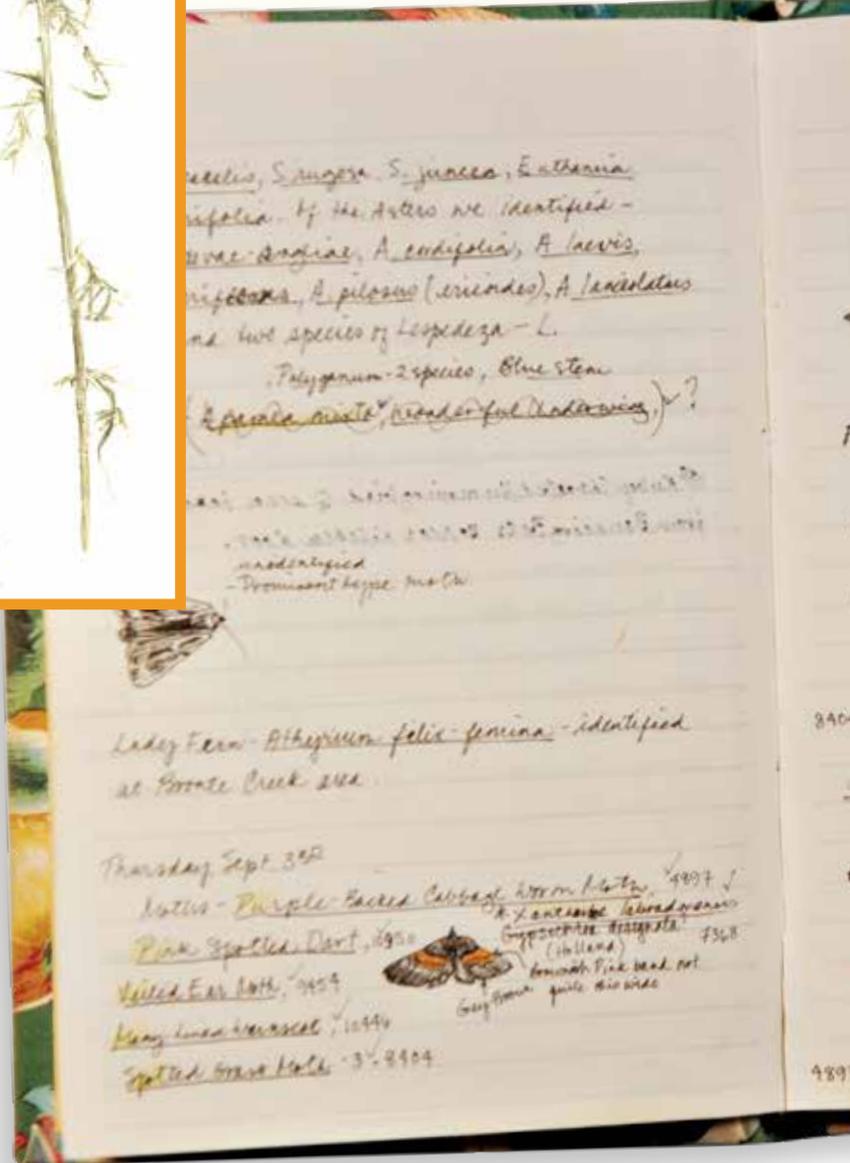
*Upstream in the Milky Way
I can see
the village of my childhood.*

► Irene exploring Hibbard Bay, north of Sault Ste. Marie in 2012.



▲ Winter - Old fields and waste places: *Arctium minus* (Common Burdock); *Phleum pratense* (Common Timothy); *Abutilon theophrasti* (Velvet-leaf); *Rumex crispus* (Curly Dock); *Carduus nutans* (Nodding Thistle).

► Sample pages of Irene McIlveen's detailed notebooks.



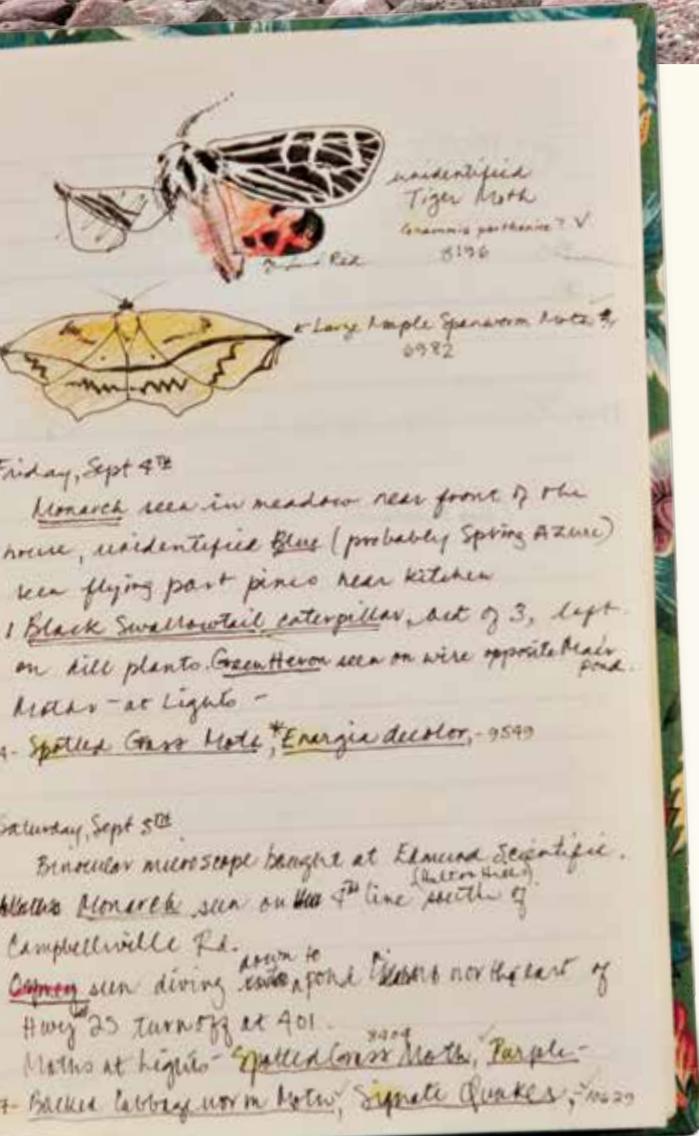
While she could speak some Japanese with her parents, Irene couldn't read the language, and her mother was reluctant to try explaining the subtleties of her verses in English. After Hanako passed

away in 2005, Irene turned to a translator and hand-bound a few copies of the English version for family members.

Like her mother, Irene had an eye for the tiniest, most telling details and moments.

And like her mother, she was modest about her talents, to the point that even close friends were unaware of her work. Her celebration of life in August 2017 was a welcome chance to showcase that work.

Irene had a deep appreciation for nature on its own terms. Although she loved to learn about wildlife from all over the world from books, television and the Internet, she believed above



all that beauty and wonder can be found all around us, wherever we are and whatever the season. Sharing that sense of wonder may well be Irene's greatest gift.

Eli McIlveen is a Hamilton-based writer, audio producer and podcaster. His current project, the fairy-tale sitcom *Alba Salix*, Royal Physician, can be heard at forgeryleague.com. **NEV**

Niagara Escarpment **Views**



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