

## IN MEMORIAM

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## OSCAR T. OWRE, A TEACHER OF ORNITHOLOGY

The passing of Dr. Oscar T. Owre has left a void in the lives of Florida's birders, ornithologists, and the many others who cherished his friendship, but especially in the lives of his former students. His death on 9 August 1990 at his Minnesota cabin was a huge loss to Florida Ornithology. If there was one universal response to his loss, it is that "it was just too soon." Yet it has come to pass, and it is up to those whose lives he has touched to continue in the way he would have urged us to do if we could still depend on hearing his hearty encouragement, "Yes, yes."

The details of his life and accomplishments are well known and are described elsewhere (see *Tropical Audubon Bulletin* Oct., 1990, and *Auk* 108: 705, 1991). In this memorial, we — some of his former graduate students — wish to pay tribute to Oscar T. Owre, this gentle man and gentleman, as our teacher of ornithology and of life. He was, above many other things, a truly dedicated and enthusiastic teacher and mentor to an incredible and continuously large gaggle of graduate and undergraduate students.

Great teachers like Dr. Owre are surely born more than made. Coming from a heritage of academe, education and public service, he was drawn naturally into his calling. His heritage along with his fundamental understanding of birds, was an unbeatable combination. Yet added to this were his sparkling intellect, his insistence on excellence in all things, his motivational approach to teaching, his attention to the needs of his students, and his breadth and depth of knowledge on so many aspects of life. He cared about so much more than birds: about music, theater, geography, history, politics, social concerns, science in its broadest scope, and especially the south Florida environment. His mind reached out to encompass virtually anything of intellectual worth.

The extra ingredient that made him such an extraordinary teacher was his wondrous sense of play. To him, learning new things was the most enjoyable of enterprises. He never stopped, and expected others never to stop, searching for new ideas, new information, or new ways of looking at life. How excited he could become over a new idea from a technical paper. His laboratory was the field, and he would lead his students through the swamps and on exhausting expeditions to the rain forests not only to study birds but to learn about themselves and about life. He was an astute observer of humanity, enthralled by human foibles, and in possession of a keenly honed sense of irony.

The intellect and knowledge, the play, the humanity, all are what made Bud Owre wise. He was a scholar and philosopher, a lover of life. Wisdom oozed from the pores of every lecture. One who listened could never be bored. The very next utterance could change a long-held perception of life. Of course, the next utterance could just as easily be an unexpectedly pointed question. He was always testing his students, himself, and in fact every one else he knew. He knew his subjects and did not allow others not to know theirs. Intellectual muddle was not to be condoned. He brought out the personal best in each of his students, but respected individual limitations.

Although we spent decades in school taking dozens of courses, we uniformly recall Bud Owre's ornithology courses as among the toughest and most inspirational. The most notable was his "Birds of the World" course. The class was based on one of his great prides, the University of Miami Reference Collection, which through his tireless efforts contained representatives of nearly every family of bird. The class was endured by a handful of overwrought graduate students, regular visitors, participating guests, and famous ornithologists passing through Miami, who were rounded up to share their specific knowledge.



**Bud Owre in his office at the University of Miami.**

The evening classes were marathons, lightened only by strong coffee and sugary treats. The pressure to perform was overwhelming, not so much from him as from the fellow students. But he loved the literature, and would seldom answer a question directly but rather took the extra time to show the inquisitor where and how to look it up. Preparation for tests continued well into the night. Several times graduate students fell asleep in the Reference Collection to be awakened by the shrieking janitorial staff, who, in any case, never knew what to expect when they opened the door. The oral final examination was widely known to include a memorized recitation and description of every family of bird. Yet when one of his head-strong pupils refused on principle to do the rote memorization, the result was a long discussion of the merits of taxonomic lists and a kindly eliciting from the student of all the appropriate information anyway. The class may be characterized as an intense, delightful blend of academic inquiry and genteel civilization.

It is puzzling in retrospect that such a fine mentor seldom explicitly directed anyone to do anything. Rather, he would discuss options, propose alternatives, warn of impediments, and reveal potentials. He had in mind many interesting research projects and knew which ones he wanted done. But a student never realized that he or she had been led by the hand to one of the most important decisions of his or her life — to undertake a specific piece of research. He would set you on the boat, but let you chart your own course. He would toss you a line if you fell overboard, but you had to pull yourself in. He was an expert in teaching his students how to sail life's seas for themselves, but he also offered shelter from the winds of "the system."

Perhaps his most intrusive pedagogical process was his review of a thesis. If the student could handle it, this was a word by word, comma by comma dissection of the long-labored

document. Remembered are long hours of sitting across the table reading aloud and bloody conflicts over syntax and grammar. In one case an argument over split infinitives led to an immediate appointment with an English professor, who sagely declared that the difference was that between formal and informal writing, which, of course, opened the never resolved discussion as to the formality of thesis writing. In the end (discretion being the better part of valor) infinitives were unsplit in the thesis and resplit before publication. This was risky, as it was not unusual to have Dr. Owre threaten to retroactively revoke a previously awarded degree for a later action that did not meet standards. The second great challenge was the defense of one's thesis. Although he always set the stage by revealing in advance what his first two questions were going to be, he always had a trick or two. In one case, for a student who despised Dr. Owre's own beloved field of anatomy, he spent the entire defense toying threateningly with a bird bone, yet never asked a question about it. For another, the committee members were served from a thermos of Bloody Mary mix. All students had to endure his field final, which consisted of home movies of birds in the wild, almost all out of focus, some flying backwards, all of which were to be identified.

Also remembered though is an extraordinary degree of tolerance. More than one graduate student appeared at his office door with a pet dog, rabbit, or parrot in hand — all of whom were tolerated, although one dog ate an important specimen. A chorus of parrots, his own and those of several graduate students, disrupted the entire science building for hours. His response to complaints on this or other matters was a winning chuckle. In spite of interruptions and disruptions, all who stopped by were greeted with his "How may I help you?" Within the university and in all other endeavors, it was Bud Owre who strove to create a light, tranquil, yet thoroughly intellectual environment, despite personalities, differences of opinion, and general chaos. He was the ultimate honest broker. His office was a never-changing sanctuary from the outside world. It was crowded to just this side of uselessness with books, bookcases, piles of projects in progress, and assorted treasures, such as a broken airplane propeller, a pickled grebe in a jar, a pair of snow shoes, miscellaneous bird bones and supplies of cookies.

He had an almost magical way of inspiring undergraduates. Many signed up for field trips but stayed with birds for life. His students had an uncommon need to share what they were doing and not a week went by that a former student didn't call or write. The process began over each season on his ornithology field trips. He would stride from the car in full gate, crossing a canal with water lapping his chin before scurrying off into the woods. His neophyte students stood in awe until they realized that they would have to scramble just to catch up with him. He was always a league ahead of his much younger companions, calling out the names of birds and enticing the birds to fly to him with an inimitable warble, identifying distant calls, and requiring at the most inopportune time that students identify a patch of fleeting feathers high in a tree. One trick was to require students to find the calling "metallic frog," which he never revealed was a clicker in his jacket pocket. His field lunches were masterpieces, something on the order of Danish cookies, pâté, Norwegian crackers, and an appropriate sherry. To him, being in the field with his birds, his students, and his lunch, was the wealth of a lifetime.

In the field and on campus, his practical jokes are legendary. The best of them we will never know, because he took great pride in pulling tricks that were never revealed. We could tell tales of when a Guyanan expedition was served vulture for dinner, of when in the middle of a boat race he jettisoned two students to lighten the load and win the contest, of food fights in Miami seafood restaurants, of getting in the middle of an Ecuadorian revolution and local Guyanan politics, of his many massive logistical failures such as when he and his students were trapped on Pigeon Key when the bridge was demolished or when his party and their belongings were tossed from boat to boat in the Pacific off Ecuador. For many years he carefully tended an empty aquarium in which he insisted resided "invisible fish." We could tell tales also of payback, when former students would arrive unan-

nounced to invade the solitude of his Minnesota cabin, of contracts for embarrassing public performances in his honor, of birthday cakes delivered at inopportune times, and of fake bird specimens inserted into his collection, where they remain to test the unwary.

His many contributions to Florida ornithology cannot pass without note. In most cases his name is nowhere to be found on them. He insisted that his students have their day in the sun. His contributions included the definitive study of the anatomy of aningas and cormorants, studies of the avifauna of southern Florida especially of Biscayne Bay, studies of the exotic avifauna of south Florida (which he carried to the birds' homelands in India and Australia), and the historic first ornithological expedition into Lake Rudolph, Kenya with Robert Maytag. He carefully documented changes in species and the numbers of birds in the southern part of Florida. He had particular concern for Florida seabirds, colonial waterbirds, endangered species, and conservation of the south Florida environment.

Beyond these accomplishments, he set in motion studies on Red-whiskered Bulbuls and Yellow-winged Parakeets in southern Florida, the role of alligator ponds in the Everglades, and the biology of White Ibis, Northern Mockingbirds, flycatchers, wintering vultures, Snail Kites, Great White Herons, Cattle Egrets, House Sparrows, and Boat-tailed Grackles. His influence extended widely, encouraging and assisting such projects as those of Erma Fisk and Patricia Bradley. Ornithological studies by his former undergraduate students are uncounted.

Most of his students did not become professional ornithologists. He was wonderfully supportive in encouraging each to follow his or her own muse. They are restaurateurs, environmental consultants and planners, artists, writers, veterinarians, photographers, government biologists, teachers, statisticians, business persons, attorneys, medical doctors, academicians, and two of the five editors of this journal. Clearly, the discipline, the search for excellence, the humanity, the child-like enthusiasm for the study of birds, and the humor he instilled were universal tools for life. As he sagely said, "You never know what is in a frog until you step on it."

The passing of Dr. Oscar T. Owre — Maytag Professor of Ornithology and Professor of Biology at the University of Miami, past President of the Tropical Audubon Society, a founding member of the Florida Ornithological Society, Board Chairman of the Miami Museum of Science, a founding father of Biscayne National Park, a scholar of Florida birds, and a teacher of generations of students — has indeed left a void in the lives of Florida's birders, ornithologists, and many others who cherished his friendship, especially his students.—**Jane (Sprangers) Bolen**, Foley Blvd. Animal Hospital, 11247 Foley Blvd., Coon Rapids, MN 55433; **Randall Breitwisch**, Department of Biology, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH 45569; **Joan A. Browder**, National Marine Fisheries Service, Virginia Key, FL; **Daniel M. Cary**, Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, 3228 S.W. Martin Downs Blvd., Suite 205, Palm City, FL 34990; **Mary V. Cummings**, 36 SW 27 Road, Miami, FL; **Sheila Gaby**, Gaby & Gaby, Environmental Consultants, 6832 SW 68 St., South Miami, FL 33143; **Susan Hilsenbeck**, University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, TX 78284, **James A. Kushlan**, Department of Biology, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677 (corresponding author), **Peter G. Merritt**, Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, 3228 S.W. Martin Downs Blvd., Suite 205, Palm City, FL 34990; and **James Wiley**, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Maryland 20708.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

**Oscar T. Owre Memorial Fund.**—The Tropical Audubon Society has established the Oscar T. Owre Memorial Fund to assist undergraduate students to pursue their interests in ornithology. Contributions may be mailed to Tropical Audubon Society, Inc., 5530 Sunset Drive, Miami, Florida 33143.