

IN MEMORIAM

Jon Charles Barlow (1935-2009)

Cathy Dutton

Curator, researcher, professor, editor, administrator — just a few of the words used to describe Dr. Jon Charles Barlow, an eminent ornithologist whose lengthy careers at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and the University of Toronto (U. of T.) left a lasting impression on the colleagues, students and organizations he was involved with. Jon passed away after succumbing to Alzheimer's disease on 9 February 2009, and left behind significant contributions to the study of ornithology and the museum community.

Jon was born in Jacksonville, Illinois in 1935. Growing up in a rural setting instilled in young Jon an interest in all things natural, and his choice of profession reflected that early interest. He



attended Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, for his undergraduate studies, majoring in Biology and Chemistry. He then migrated west to the University of Kansas for his Master's degree, where his thesis dealt with the "Natural History of the Bell Vireo (*Vireo bellii* Audubon)." His Ph.D. dissertation at U. Kansas was on the

"Ecology and Zoogeography of Uruguayan Mammals." Upon completion of his Ph.D. in 1965, Jon left the US and came to Canada to take up a position as Curator-in-Charge in the Ornithology Department at the Royal Ontario Museum.

Under Jon's headship, the Ornithology Department grew in both size and scope. He was a steadfast promoter and supporter of departmental initiatives, and

was not hesitant to push for the resources he felt the Department or the Museum needed to raise the collections and research to international prominence and standards.

Departmental staff increased from four to ten people, and the collections expanded significantly as a result of a worldwide fieldwork program he instituted to broaden the geographical representation in the collections. He initiated the alcohol/formaldehyde and skeleton collections, and largely through his initiatives the skeleton collection is ranked today as one of the largest in the world. He was instrumental in modernizing collections curation, and established a laboratory for bird-song analyses that included a real-time sound spectrograph system. He also started a collection of recorded bird songs to which he personally added many species.

Jon held the Ornithology Headship position until 1976, and remained a Curator of Ornithology at the ROM until his retirement in 2001. He became a Canadian citizen, and during his tenure at the ROM, served on more than 20 committees. He was a key player in the development of the Ornithology Gallery, which opened in 1991. Jon also instituted the annual Royal Ontario Museum Research Colloquium in 1979 and served as Colloquium Coordinator and Chair until 2000. The Colloquium continues to this day.

Jon's research interests focused on the evolution of song birds — both native and introduced — in the Western Hemi-

sphere, with a special focus on the Vireonidae. He studied 35 of the 47 Vireonidae species in the field (most extensively in Texas, the West Indies, Mexico, and Ontario), recording their vocalizations and interpreting the message content of various songs and calls. Jon also studied the ecology and behaviour of Emberizine sparrows (*Spizella*), and conducted research on Eurasian Tree Sparrows (*Passer montanus*), comparing song, morphometric and genetic changes. However, it was his work on the Vireonidae for which he is most remembered, and he was one of the world's foremost authorities on this family.

Since the ROM was still part of the University of Toronto when Jon arrived in 1965, he was also hired as an Assistant Professor in the Zoology Department at U. of T. He became a full Professor in 1980, a position he held until 2001. Throughout the course of his tenure, he taught undergraduate courses in avian biology, bird diversity and systematic ornithology. He also supervised 28 Zoology graduate students. In 1982, he was cross-appointed to the Graduate Faculty in the Museum Studies Program at U. of T., serving as Director and Graduate Student Coordinator at various times, and supervising 15 graduate students in the program until his retirement.

In addition to his numerous contributions to the ROM and U. of T., Jon was active in a number of ornithological societies, including: The Wilson Ornithological Society, for which he served two terms as President and a six-year term as

Editor of *The Wilson Bulletin*; The Society of Canadian Ornithologists, for which he also served two terms as President; The Cooper Ornithological Society as a member of the Executive Board; and the American Ornithologists' Union, of which he was a Fellow and served on numerous committees (Animal Care and Research, Membership, Research, etc). Jon was also actively involved with the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute, serving as Chairman of the Board of Scientists for several terms, and the Metro Toronto Zoo, where he served on a number of boards and committees, including the Animal Care Committee and the Board of Directors.

In recognition of Jon's contributions to ornithology and the museum community, he received the Award of Merit from the Ontario Museum Association in 1993 for "outstanding contributions to the museum community," and the Bruce Naylor Award from the Alliance of Natural History Museums of Canada in 2008, for "exceptional contributions to the study of museum-based natural history in Canada."

Though Jon is remembered for his extensive involvement in research, teaching, museology, and professional organizations, those who knew him well remember him for so much more. During the memorial service for Jon, he was described by many as a "larger-than-life" personality. His sharp wit, wide range of interests and uncanny memory for details meant he could begin a conversation talking about vireo behavior and vocaliza-

tions and end with the latest baseball statistics, or some obscure garage band that only ever recorded one album. He amassed a large collection of vintage records and was also an avid movie buff, the Wizard of Oz being one of his favourites. Ornithology colleagues at the ROM remember movie sound bites ("we're not in Kansas anymore Toto") issuing from his office as his computer booted up.

Jon was not only a colleague and mentor, he was a family man. He was proud of his five children and frequently spoke of their accomplishments. Though none of the children followed in Dad's footsteps, he encouraged them in whatever paths they chose to follow, and he relished their successes.

If you spent any significant amount of time in Jon's company, you invariably ended up with a nick-name. Those fortunate (?) individuals included "Smooter", "Ayley-Meister", "Murph the Smurf", "Dickie J.", "Rossini", "Jimmy Duck", "Aegis", "Tommy turtle-nose", "Wingy" and "Ruddy-Bumpkin" (you folks know who you are) to name a few. Jon even gave himself his own nick-name — "Jonny Cool". Though Alzheimer's robbed Jon of his memories, the contributions he made to the study of ornithology, the knowledge he passed on to his students, the shared experiences with colleagues in the field, and the many and wide-ranging conversations he engaged in with others, will not be forgotten.

Rest in peace Jonny Cool.

Selected Publications

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