

Florida Field Naturalist 18(4): 97-99, 1990.

IN MEMORIAM: RALPH W. SCHREIBER, 1942-1988

JAMES J. DINSMORE

Department of Animal Ecology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011

Ralph Schreiber, a world expert on pelicans and seabirds, died on 29 March 1988 in Los Angeles. Born in 1942, Ralph received a B.A. from the College of Wooster (Ohio) in 1964, a M.S. from the University of Maine in 1967, and the Ph.D. from the University of South Florida in 1974. From 1976 until his death, Ralph was Curator of Ornithology and section head at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. In 1984, he was appointed section head for mammals as well and was responsible for the section's research exhibits, budget, and educational programs.

In fewer than 46 years, Ralph packed in a lot of living. He traveled extensively, especially in the Central Pacific Ocean. He was the author or co-author of more than 80 scientific publications as well as two books, numerous reviews, 15 popular articles, and 12 technical reports. He deservedly earned the reputation of being one of the most talented biologists working with seabirds, especially the pelicans. That is but a brief sketch of Ralph; more details are available in another tribute (Woolfenden, G. E. 1989. *Auk* 106: 137-139). What I would like to do here is touch on the Florida years, an important part of Ralph's career.

Ralph moved to Florida in 1969 and enrolled in a doctoral program under Glen Woolfenden at the University of South Florida. He arrived in Florida after spending three years working on various islands in the Pacific Ocean for the Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Project of the Smithsonian Institution. Although much of his work in the Pacific had involved banding seabirds, Ralph had also become familiar with the fascinating breeding and molt cycles of various seabirds as well as the problems some species encountered in obtaining adequate food for themselves and their young. These topics dominated his work for the rest of his life.

At South Florida, Ralph undertook a comprehensive study of Brown Pelicans in the Tampa Bay region. The timing was perfect as the concerns over the effects of DDT on the breeding success of some birds were reaching their peak. Louisiana (the pelican state) had lost all of their breeding Brown Pelicans and there were concerns that Florida's Brown Pelican populations would decline too. Much of Ralph's work was done at the Tarpon Key colony at the mouth of Tampa Bay. He also studied several other area colonies. Ralph didn't limit his work to the breeding season but monitored the birds year around. He studied Brown Pelican behavior, food habits, breeding biology, productivity, movements, molt, energetics, and effects of environmental toxicants, truly a huge task. In the end, he wrote up the data on pelican behavior for his dissertation which he completed in 1974. Overall, he wrote some 20 papers on Florida pelicans, most of them based on data he collected during his dissertation research. Three of these papers—a monograph on pelican behavior, a summary of pelican nesting success, and a review of pelican populations in the United States—are especially significant and established Ralph as an expert on the species.

In addition to his work on pelicans, Ralph also studied a number of other birds of the region. In 1972, the two of us (and later his wife Elizabeth Anne) began a study of Laughing Gulls along the St. Petersburg Bayway that continued for several years. He also wrote papers on frigatebirds, ducks, and terns based on his work from this period. In all, Ralph authored or co-authored about 39 scientific papers based on work in Florida, most of it done from 1969 to 1976.

Ralph was a regular member of the annual spring and summer forays to the Dry Tortugas to band Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies. Because of his previous experience with

seabirds in the Pacific Ocean, his ideas added new dimensions to evening discussions of seabird biology. Ralph also was a formidable "opponent" in the inevitable competition to see who could band the most tern chicks.

One of the most important events in Ralph's life occurred in 1972 when he married Elizabeth Anne Ferguson. Betty Anne was immediately part of the team and the two worked together for the rest of Ralph's life. They co-authored numerous papers over the next 16 years, and she is continuing the field work, analysis, and publication of their research.

Ralph was first and foremost a field biologist and was especially interested in various aspects of breeding biology including nesting success, food habits, and feeding rates of the young. Big (six feet four) and angular, he moved rapidly and efficiently as he worked through a colony. Still he was always gentle with the birds and was continually concerned about the effect that investigators or other intruders might have on the nesting success of the birds he was studying. Ralph's height, booming voice, and loud laugh made him stand out in a crowd. His congenial nature and interest in the work of others naturally drew people to him, and he always attracted attention at meetings.

Besides his research, Ralph was active in the ornithological community in Florida. He was a charter member of the Florida Ornithological Society and served as its Vice President from 1975 to 1977. He was on the Board of Directors of the Florida Audubon Society from 1975 to 1977.

My favorite memories of Ralph involve the days we worked together in the Laughing Gull colony near the St. Petersburg Bayway. At the end of several hot days, I recall sitting quietly with him near the beach and watching the sun set while the gulls returned to feed their young or to gather to roost on the beach. Back on the mainland, our comic relief was to drive into St. Petersburg, enter a restaurant in our sweat-soaked and gull barf-covered clothes, and order something cold to drink. They were good times.

The story I best remember him relating to me was how one time one side of his observation tower on Tarpon Key slowly sank in the mud and tipped over. Since he was on top of the tower at the time, he and a valuable camera ended up soaked in the salty, muddy waters of the lagoon. He laughed about it but also lamented the loss of some photographs he had taken.

Ralph was a top-notch scientist who left behind a wealth of published material that will be referred to for decades. His work on Brown Pelicans is especially important both for helping turn the tide in the decline in this species and for providing baseline data that others will use in the future. Of equal importance, he was an enjoyable person to be around and one who quickly conveyed his strong interest in birds to others. To say he will be missed seems trite, but it is true.



Ralph clowning it up after a day of banding Brown Pelicans on the Indian River near Vero Beach on Florida's east coast, 17 June 1971. From left, Ralph Schreiber, Glen Woolfenden, Janet Falk, Herb Kale, and Patricia Dolan. Photograph taken by Chet Winegarner.

FLORIDA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS

Species Index to Florida Bird Records in Audubon Field Notes and American Birds Volumes 1-30 1947-1976, by Margaret C. Bowman. 1978. Florida Ornithological Society, Special Publication No. 1. Price \$4.00.

The Carolina Parakeet in Florida, by Daniel McKinley. 1985. Florida Ornithological Society, Special Publication No. 2. Price \$6.00.

Status and Distribution of the Florida Scrub Jay, by Jeffrey A. Cox. 1987. Florida Ornithological Society, Special Publication No. 3. Price \$8.00.

Order prepaid from the Secretary; add \$1.00 for handling and shipping charge. Make checks payable to the Florida Ornithological Society.