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Wayne J. Mollhoff

Nebraska Ornithologists' Union

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In Memory of John J. Dinan, 1954 - 2005

by Wayne J. Mollhoff

It was immediately obvious to anyone who knew John that his work with the birds and other wildlife of Nebraska was more than just a job – it was his life, and he lived it with a passion. Although not always a formal member of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union, John, as much as anyone, was “dedicated to the study, appreciation, and protection of birds” in Nebraska.

Those privileged enough to spend time afield with John quickly became aware of the presence of not just a professional biologist, but one still fired with that first innocent curiosity at discovering Nebraska's natural environment. That curiosity led him to discover the first Nebraska specimen record of a Great-tailed Grackle. He continually challenged his own observations with the practiced skepticism of the professional observer. Even better, he also possessed the rare ability to teach that attitude to others, by letting them “discover” that even their most obvious observations needed to be questioned, rather than simply telling them that what they saw might be open to other interpretation.

Early in John's career with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission (NGPC), one of the projects that fit in with his preference for field work was a multi-year nesting study of Panhandle raptors – primarily Ferruginous Hawks, Prairie Falcons and Golden Eagles. It involved strenuous hiking, climbing, and rappelling - and the occasional gut-wrenching, heart-stopping moment on a cliff when a rope slipped unexpectedly. Twenty-five years later, I had a chance meeting with a local blacksmith in Crawford who specifically remembered making some steel belay stakes to use above treeless cliffs for John and "those other crazy kids."

Perhaps one of his longest-running projects involved work with threatened and endangered bird species, especially Piping Plovers and Least Terns. Any attempt to modify or preserve critical nesting sites and other habitat along the Platte River inevitably had an impact on human use in the area by farmers, irrigators, gravel mining operations, and recreational users of the river. John was noted for turning those encounters between economic and recreational interests and the endangered species under study into joint ventures acceptable to all involved, rather than the acrimonious, litigious, head-butting contests that have dominated headlines elsewhere.

One recent, time-devouring project of particular interest to the NOU involved John in the publication of *The Nebraska Breeding Bird Atlas*. He not only found a major part of the funding for publication, but more importantly, he devoted his time to guide the writing, rewriting, editing, and other details required to shepherd the manuscript through the process, finally seeing it through to completion. Without John's guidance, persistence, and the patience of a saint in dealing with all the individuals involved, it might still be unfinished.

John became the public face for other projects as well: Peregrine Falcon introduction in downtown Omaha, Whooping Crane monitoring, American Kestrel nest box placement along the highways, the Nebraska Natural Heritage Project, and others. When someone contacted NGPC with a question concerning non-game birds, they often asked directly for John, and, if they didn't, were frequently referred to him.

At the time his leukemia was discovered, John was a key part of the team bringing the Nebraska Natural Legacy Project, a statewide effort to conserve and protect the habitats and wildlife of Nebraska, to fruition. As his illness played out, he faced it with the same dignity, unflinching courage, resolution, and good humor that marked the rest of his life. Hours before his death, he was still able to manage an abashed chuckle at his own inability several years previously to scramble up a spindly ponderosa pine to look into the nest of a Western Tanager he had found; it was only the second such nest found in the state.

Lost unexpectedly in the prime of his life and career, John will be sorely missed by a host of colleagues and friends.