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Paul Austin Johnsgard: Memories of an Exceptional Naturalist

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On May 28, 2021 the world lost one of its most dogged advocates, and we lost an amazing teacher, naturalist, and friend. Paul has told you in his own words in the previous pages where he was from, where he was educated, about the immense number of scholarly articles and books he published, and about his beautiful art that brought the wild to all of us (<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/zeabook/30/>), but we wanted to share the person we knew Paul to be, and to relive some of our memories of him. While Paul's body of work will continue to impact the ornithological and scientific communities for years to come, the man that Paul was – enthusiastic, caring, and deeply passionate about the natural world – changed the lives of everyone he met, and that too deserves celebration.

Paul was the pre-eminent teacher. As a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), he taught many university students, and through his writings, he reached even more people beyond the university. There are many of us who met him on the Platte River and had the opportunity to learn from him there, and to take the enthusiasm and love he had for the ecology of the Great Plains and spread it to our own friends and family. For the two of us, Paul was never officially our teacher, but our meeting on the Platte helped to shape our love of Nebraska's wild places, influenced our science, and provided a model for how we share knowledge with others.

Allison became an ornithologist because of Paul. They met in 2003 when she was in high school. Her family had traveled to Kearney for the Rivers and Wildlife Celebration (now Audubon's Nebraska Crane Festival) where Paul was giving a presentation about cranes. What it was about, she couldn't tell you, because, as Paul enjoyed recounting, she wasn't paying attention to him. She was in the back of the room, drawing in a sketchbook. Like any good professor, he was annoyed, but upon approaching her after the presentation and seeing her drawing, he found an opportunity to encourage a passion. He gave her a book, *Song of the North Wind*, and he drew in the front a sketch of a Snow Goose. After that first meeting Paul became a constant in her life. If she had a question, he'd write to her with the answer, or suggest a book, or send her a book! He encouraged Allison to become a better artist. She'd show him her sketches and he, of course, would make sure she had drawn the correct number of primary feathers!



Greater Prairie-Chicken by Paul Johnsgard.

Through Paul, Allison had her first opportunity to visit the Galapagos Islands. Before they went to the Galapagos, he had thrifted a fabulous pair of bright, shiny-blue Air Jordan tennis shoes. Allison's favorite memory from that trip is of Paul sitting on a rock, checking through his photos while right next to a displaying male Blue-footed Booby. To this day, Allison maintains that the male booby was displaying because the vivid blue of Paul's shoes had caused him to be insecure.

Paul also introduced Allison to Charles and Mary Bomberger Brown, who gave Allison her first experience doing avian research in the field. Through this, he ensured that her continued study of birds would be a certainty, and also ensured that, like Charles' study of social Cliff Swallows, she would work on a social bird species (Australia) for her own graduate work. In the last few years, Allison has been doing work at UNL as a researcher, and

her office has been just down the hallway from Paul's. While COVID kept them away from each other in person, Paul would often leave books for her on her desk or in her mailbox. She will forever count herself fortunate to have been his friend.

Charles met Paul in 1981, when Charles came to check out the Cedar Point Biological Station near Ogallala as a potential site for a graduate study on Cliff Swallows. When told that Paul Johnsgard was there at the time teaching ornithology, Charles was star struck, because even as an undergraduate he had one of Paul's waterfowl books and knew him to be famous. Paul immediately expressed interest and enthusiasm for what Charles wanted to do with Cliff Swallows, and very quickly offered to show Charles some Cliff Swallow colonies nearby. Charles later realized how out of character that was for Paul, because he was very stingy with his time in those days, and Charles was not affiliated with UNL. But formal academic affiliations never much mattered to Paul. He took Charles to two Platte River bridges where they got a ladder out, and with Paul holding the ladder, Charles climbed up to his first cliff swallow nests. *Paul Johnsgard* was holding the ladder!

Throughout the next 20 years while Paul was teaching at Cedar Point, Paul and Charles interacted daily. Paul imparted a huge knowledge of Nebraska birds and natural history during the many meals they shared. He was a trusted advisor to Charles on other topics such as where to go in the Grand Tetons, what to expect on a trip to

Kenya, or the best camera equipment to buy. Charles was incredibly fortunate to get so much of him on a daily basis during the time he was at Cedar Point each summer. Charles always looked forward to the sessions when Paul taught, especially the 5-week ones that allowed plenty of time for Paul to prowl the haunts around Cedar Point and report back on the birds he was finding. It was disappointing when he started teaching in the shorter 3-week sessions, and after his departure each summer, Charles always had a feeling of intense loss for the rest of that season. We can all relate to that now.

Paul liked to play tricks on his ornithology classes at Cedar Point, especially ones that weren't performing to his standards. Charles' favorite, of course, was the time Paul was giving a field quiz to the class, and they happened upon a fledgling Cliff Swallow sitting on a wire. Paul told the class to identify it, even though they had not seen Cliff Swallows of that age before. Juveniles have mottled foreheads and throats and thus look a little different from adults. As the class was puzzling over the strange bird, Paul became crestfallen when an adult Cliff Swallow arrived and fed the juvenile, certain the game was up. But Paul still got the last laugh, as he gleefully reported later that most of the class missed it anyway!

Although Paul and Charles had other contact outside Cedar Point, it is Paul's Cedar Point years that were obviously most special to Charles. He has often thought of Paul in the years since he was a regular there: when someone wears a Cedar Point t-shirt with one of Paul's drawings, when ornithology classes mass along the Cedar Point road staring off at waterbirds, when a question arises about the local status of some bird species, or during ventures into the Sandhills when his lyrical passages in *This Fragile Land* come to mind. Just over a year before Paul died, Charles gave one of dozens of presentations about Cliff Swallows that Paul had attended over the years, but this one was special because it described 40-year changes in Cliff Swallow biology at Cedar Point. As Charles saw Paul sitting in the front row, it was emotional thinking at the time that without Paul's early influence, there well could never have been such a project in the first place. And perhaps most of all, Paul helped to kindle Charles' love for Nebraska and its natural places, as he did for so many of us.

When Paul passed away, both of us were at the Cedar Point Biological Station. Allison was teaching ornithology and Charles was studying Cliff Swallows. It was poetic, because Paul had also taught ornithology at Cedar Point, and because Charles was with the swallows that Paul had encouraged him to study. We debated about going back to see him one last time, but we knew he would have wanted us to keep doing what we love and what he had so influenced. A few days after Paul passed, Charles gave a guest lecture to Allison's students. At the end of his lecture, Charles presented a picture of Paul with Allison, and told the class they were Paul's legacy. Paul helped us become the scientists we are today, and we are teaching the next generation of scientists. In the end, we are all Paul's legacy. Many have their own memories of Paul, memories of Sandhill Cranes and prairie chickens, of photography and long, wonderful chats. While Paul is gone, he is not forgotten, and we hope everyone whose lives he touched continues to protect, to educate, and to impassion just as Paul always did.