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Remembering Clem Klaphake

By Don Paseka

Clement (Clem) Klaphake passed away on December 30, 2022, from complications of Parkinson's disease, which he struggled with for several years. He was born in Melrose, Minnesota, in 1943 and grew up working on his parents' dairy farm, which included the usual menagerie of other farm animals typical of that time. Perhaps it was the routine of milking twice a day, seven days a week, or the impressive scar on his leg from a boar tusk, but Clem was destined to leave the farm and become a life-long educator.

After finishing high school, he was the first in his family to attend college. He paid for his education by trapping and selling furs, which seems very unlike the Clem most of us knew. In 1965 he earned a Bachelor of Science degree from St. Cloud State, and after graduation he taught for a year at the high school in Paynton, Saskatchewan, on the Cree Nation Reservation.

Clem then returned to Minnesota and for the next two years, he taught school in Canby, Minnesota. While there he met an English teacher named Elizabeth Anders, who was to become his soulmate and spouse of over fifty years. However, their relationship was put on hold in 1968 during the Vietnam war when Clem received a draft notification from the Army. His bad vision in one eye kept him from serving overseas, but ironically, he became an expert marksman and served at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, as a psychologist, rising to the rank of E-6.

After his discharge in 1970, he married Elizabeth (Bette), and his desire to further his standing as an educator led the newlyweds to Greeley, Colorado, where Clem earned a Master's degree in sociology at the University of Northern Colorado. This physical proximity to the mountains fostered a lifelong love of the Rockies which he shared with his family. After getting his degree in 1971, Clem was hired to teach sociology, anthropology, and environmental sciences at Bellevue University in Nebraska, where he taught until his retirement in 2010. Clem and Bette's two sons, Eric and Damon, were raised in the enviably vibrant environment of a two-teacher household and were introduced to camping, fishing, dinosaurs, birds, zoos, fossil sites, and star gazing.

Clem was an avid birder. He was a long-time member of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union and served as president for two years. He was an active member of the Audubon Society of Omaha and was frequently asked to lead field trips for both organizations. As Fontenelle Forest sector captain of the Omaha Christmas Bird



Clem Klaphake 1943-2022

Count, he always brought some of his students from Bellevue to walk the trails and help with the count. In 2019 he received the Outstanding Volunteer Award for his thirty-nine years of service to Fontenelle Forest, where he had served on the board of directors and for many years volunteered to teach their spring introductory birding class. For many years he would be the one who would post an answer to a question on the NEBirds listserv from a non-birder or a new birder, showing again his penchant for education, not to mention his seemingly limitless patience.

Unlike many of his birding cohorts, Clem was not very much into listing, but spent a great deal of time doing citizen science. For many years, he did a couple of Breeding Bird Survey routes in the Nebraska sandhills, and he was always accompanied by Bette, the consummate “SOB” (spouse-of-birder).

In 2002 Clem started a long stint as a volunteer counter at the Hitchcock Nature Center Hawkwatch near Honey Creek, Iowa. While still teaching, he would spend every Thursday, his day off, counting migrating raptors and vultures. Doing this every week from the first of September until mid-December was a demanding commitment. Standing out in the elements, which ranged from the blazing heat early in the season to bone chilling cold at the end, was not a task to be taken lightly. Despite his skill and dedication, Thursdays at Hitchcock acquired the reputation of being disproportionately cloudy or damp with little or no raptor movement and generally unproductive. Those days are still referred to as “Clem days” at the hawkwatch. Clem continued climbing the tower and counting raptors at Hitchcock until 2019, when the onset of Parkinson’s made it difficult for him.

In late December 2022, Clem and Bette made one last move to Colorado Springs to be near family and the mountains he loved.