HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES:
ROGER CONANT
MARGARET M. STEWART AND DALE BELCHER

Roger Conant was born on 6 May 1909 at Mamaroneck, New York, the only child of Charles Francis Conant and Clara Elizabeth Rogers. He is proud of being a lineal descendant of the original Roger Conant, who left England a few years after the Pilgrims and founded the colony that eventually became Salem, Massachusetts. His father, who was in the iron and steel business died when Roger was 12 years old. Clara moved with her son to Red Bank, New Jersey, where they lived with her parents, who were important to Roger’s youth. Although Clara was brought up to be a housewife, she entered the teaching profession where, after a few years of practice teaching, she was certified to teach kindergarten and first grade in the Red Bank school system. Her pay was minimal; thus, keeping her little family going was difficult.

Roger’s interest in herpetology was first kindled at a Boy Scout camp on the New York–Connecticut line when he was 12. Friends had invited Roger and his mother for the summer. Two of Albert H. Wright’s students from Cornell were camp counselors, and all the boys at camp learned much about amphibians and reptiles from Wright’s students. On a hike with one of the counselors in late August, Roger found a copperhead. It was lying coiled, and the counselor permitted Roger to help with the capture. The incident had a dramatic effect on the boy who was fascinated with the snake. “That’s what started me in herpetology.”

Roger graduated from Red Bank High School in 1925 at age 16 and promptly looked for a job. With the help of a schoolmate, and also from his being an Eagle Scout, he became a cashier at the Twin Brook Zoo, just outside town. It was a beautiful little zoo owned and run by a wealthy man who had allowed Roger to spend some time in the zoo. The keepers noted his enthusiasm and interest in the animals, and soon Roger was working there. It was the experience of working with the animals in that small zoo that convinced Roger that zoo work was to be his profession. He realized that he needed a college degree, but that was difficult with no money in the family. He wanted to go to Cornell or the University of Michigan, but his mother would not hear of his going so far away. He matriculated at the University of Pennsylvania, although its biology curriculum was aimed at premedical training, uninteresting to Roger. Having to borrow so much money during the depression, and yet not getting the kind of education he wanted, convinced Roger to quit college after two years. Roger had a lucky break in 1929. With good references from his hard work in his previous zoo experience, he got a job as Curator of Reptiles at the Toledo Zoo. He was not yet 20 years old.

Roger moved up rapidly at the Toledo Zoo until he was offered a job as Curator of Reptiles at the Philadelphia Zoo in 1935. He stayed at “America’s first zoo” until he retired in 1973. He was Director there from 1967–1973. Roger tells interesting stories about his life in those jobs in his autobiography (Conant, 1997).

Roger has had a dual career as both a field herpetologist producing research articles and monographs and as a zoo curator and director. In both roles, he has had significant influence on others, especially young people interested in animals. He realized early on that, for zoos to be meaningful as education tools and to be attractive to animals as well as people, they had to change from the “tile bathroom” model to naturalistic habitat displays, which he started in the Toledo Zoo. With the aid of the Civil Works Administration and with Works Progress Administration funded workers, he changed the zoo in a way that has become standard for zoos today. He carried that idea on to the Philadelphia Zoo whose Reptile House bears a plaque designating the natural habitat settings throughout the building as the “Roger Conant Exhibits.”

No one knows exactly how extensive Roger’s influence has been as an educator about the animal world. For nearly 34 years, Roger had a weekly radio broadcast on Philadelphia KYW, “Let’s Visit the Zoo.” In his files, he has over 5000 letters he wrote to youngsters in answer to their queries, primarily about reptiles. For the Boy Scouts of America, he wrote the Reptile Study Merit Badge Pamphlet, first published in 1944, then revised several times over a period of almost 50 years. Roger had become an Eagle Scout himself at age 14. Certainly his field guides have been extremely influential in getting young people interested in herpetology. In 1995, Roger was awarded the Nature Educator...