OBITUARY

JOHN FREDERICK EISENBERG: 1935–2003

Dr. John F. Eisenberg, scientist, teacher, and mentor of remarkable intellectual breadth, died Sunday, 6 July 2003, at his home in Bellingham, Washington. He was 68. John’s indefatigable spirit, contagious passion for knowledge, and sheer scientific brilliance earned him a reputation as one of the foremost mammalian biologists in the world. He lived his life with passion and a fierce sense of purpose, and was a remarkably colorful and unforgettable personality. John was a Fellow of the Animal Behavior Society and the New York Zoological Society, as well as recipient of the C. Hart Merriam Award, the highest research honor bestowed by the American Society of Mammalogists. In 2001 he was the corecipient of the Archie F. Carr Medal award by the University of Florida for his contributions to wildlife conservation. Eisenberg wrote more than 150 major scientific publications on the ecology, behavior, and evolution of mammals. In biological circles, he was recognized as a “big picture” person. His ability to synthesize diverse knowledge culminated in the publication of The Mammalian Radiations: An Analysis of Adaptation, Ecology, and Behavior, a book published in 1982 by the University of Chicago Press. He completed the encyclopedic 3-volume Mammals of the Neotropics in 2000 with coauthor Kent Redford.

John was born in Everett, Washington, the 1st of 2 sons of Otto and Bernice nee Sessions Eisenberg. It was a close-knit family. Everett was then one of the great mill towns of the Northwest, and John was drawn to wildlife and fishing with his father, brother, and uncles Carl and Boots. If John wasn’t born with a fierce sense of independence and individualism, he doubtless learned those qualities from his roving, adventurous uncles. He became a compulsive reader at a young age, and frequently visited Everett’s library and its little zoo, a legacy from Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. For a 6th grade class project, he drew a very large, complex plan for a zoo, which included many design features attuned to proper husbandry. A turning point in his youth was the discovery of a magazine article that showed how to build a live trap from a quart juice can and a mousetrap. He began trapping local rodents, which he observed as pets. It became a lasting passion.

John worked in several mills during the summer to put himself through college. One of his favorite stories took place the summer he worked as a “sorter” at Walton’s plywood mill. The 1st day on the job was going well, but when the saws began to buzz after lunch a piercing scream rose above the drone. “I was sure someone had fallen into the blade,” and he rushed to an old millhand to help. “Never mind, son,” hollered the bemused worker. “It’s only old Gus. He’s deaf and has the piles. Can’t hear himself when he’s in the crapper.”

John decided early in life to break with the family tradition, go to college, and escape from life in the mill town. It was not a decision based on disdain, for John identified strongly with his roots in the working class, and retained a soft place for “the common man” throughout his life. He enrolled at Washington State University at Pullman, where Helmut K. Buechner was one of his instructors. There he married Ellen Franzen. After graduating with honors, he was accepted to graduate school in zoology at the University of California, Berkeley, where he did his master’s degree and Ph.D. under Peter Marler, who was heading up a new program in ethology. He published one of his