

Vagn F. Flyger, International Squirrel Authority



Vagn F. Flyger
1922–2006

Vagn Folkman Flyger died from congestive heart failure at his home in Silver Spring, Maryland on 9 January 2006, 5 days short of his 84th birthday. Born on 14 January 1922 in Aalborg, Denmark, his family moved to Jamestown, New York a year later. Vagn's interest in wildlife began as a boy catching snakes and other critters near his home. Supportive parents and teachers further developed those interests. He graduated from Cornell University, Ithaca, New York in 1948 with a B.S. degree in zoology. Vagn obtained his M.S. degree in wildlife management from Penn State University, State College, Pennsylvania in 1952 and Sc.D. degree in vertebrate ecology from Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland in 1956. His professional interests by now focused on mammalian ecology and wildlife habitats.

On leaving Johns Hopkins, Vagn went to work for the Maryland Department of Research and Education at its Chesapeake Biological Laboratory in Solomons, Maryland. In 1962 the laboratory was reorganized under the University of Maryland and from that year to 1967 Vagn served as a Research Associate Professor in the university's Natural Resources Institute. He was Chairman of its Department of

Forestry, Fish and Wildlife from 1962–1974. Vagn was promoted to full Professor in 1967. From 1975–1979 he served as Professor in the Center for Environmental and Estuarine Studies and from 1980 until his retirement in 1987, as a Professor in the Department of Animal Science. He was awarded Emeritus Professor rank following retirement.

Vagn's M.S. and Sc.D. research projects dealt with the eastern gray squirrel, a subject on which he became an international authority. More than 40% of his publication record focused on squirrels. He was interested in all species, forms, and conditions. He was famous—or perhaps, infamous—around the University of Maryland for circulating flyers asking people to bring him road-killed squirrels, without regard to any state of compression or decomposition they might be found in. Squirrels were collected over a 51-year time period and he used the carcasses to study population characteristics, disease, parasites, and other phenomena. Vagn was interested in urban squirrels as well as rural ones. He conducted collaborative studies on gray squirrels in Washington, D.C., that revealed how squirrels interact with humans. Studies were conducted on the movement of squirrels after capture and relocation in which new insight was gained into squirrel management in urban and suburban parks. One of Vagn's test criteria for successful graduate students working on squirrels was whether students could safely remove a captured squirrel from a live trap without a gloved hand. As we recall, only one student passed this test. Vagn could do it and often mentioned that one reason he returned from studying polar bears to studying squirrels was that squirrels don't bite like polar bears. With a sparkle in his eye, Vagn would discuss the migratory flights of flying squirrels to and from their breeding and wintering grounds. He tricked many listeners, including us, with his wit.

Vagn had broad interests in mammals beyond squirrels and also published on shrews, opossums, deer, polar bears, whales, and seals. His work included the fields of ecology, behavior, field methods, exotic species, disease, pathology, anatomy, physiology, conservation, and management of animal damage and wildlife habitats. Vagn studied mammals worldwide and was a member of the 7 Continents Club. In 1952 he and a colleague documented the occurrence of the long-tailed shrew in Maryland. In 1960 he identified an exotic deer on James Island, Maryland, as sika deer, rather than hog deer as some people believed.

Vagn conducted pioneering work with the automatic projectile syringe and tranquilizers for capturing animals. In 1960, at a symposium on the automatic projectile syringe, he presented a paper discussing his research on use of the new Cap-Chur gun and syringe for capturing white-tailed deer in Maryland. One-hundred-twelve animals were successfully