In Memoriam: Kurt Milton Pickett (1972–2011)

MICHAEL S. ENGEL,1,4 JAMES M. CARPENTER,2 AND JOHN W. WENZEL 3

Gone – flitted away,
Taken the stars from the night and the sun
From the day!
Gone, and a cloud in my heart.

—Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892), The Window; or, The Songs of the Wrens, 1871

On the evening of Friday, 11 February 2011, the world lost one of its most promising stars in entomology, sociobiology, and empirical and theoretical phylogenetics. Kurt M. Pickett passed away after a long and painful struggle with cancer. He was 38.

Kurt grew up in southern Louisiana, one of five boys born to Kathy and Henry Pickett. Kurt had an interesting ancestry in that he was partly of Cajun origin as well as a direct descendent of Major General George Pickett who led the infamous “Pickett’s Charge” on the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg. From an early age Kurt was also an active participant in many service organizations, including the development of the Philadelphia Center in Shreveport. He remained throughout his life a significant contributor to the social dialogue of all the communities in which he resided.

After graduating from Louisiana State University with a B.S. in Biology in 1996, Kurt relocated to the Ohio State University in Columbus where he would undertake graduate study in Entomology under the direction of his mentor and close friend, John W. Wenzel. Kurt first undertook work on the social behavior of paper wasps, finishing a M.S. in 1998 before expanding his work to encompass a significant phylogenetic component alongside his behavioral investigations. After completing his Ph.D. in 2003, Kurt started a highly successful stint as a Theodore Roosevelt Postdoctoral Fellow at the American Museum of Natural History, working with James M. Carpenter.

In 2007, Kurt joined the faculty in the Department of Biology at the University of Vermont and despite the fact that his health struggles dogged him throughout the days of his brief tenure he was an exceptionally productive and positive member of his faculty, receiving an early promotion to Associate Professor shortly before his passing. He was also Curator of Invertebrates for the University of Vermont’s Zadock Thompson Natural History Collection, and made considerable strides...