

Edward H. “Jed” Burt, Jr., 1948–2016

Authors: Jack M. Stenger, and Sean M. Williams

Source: *The Auk*, 134(1) : 269-271

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1642/AUK-16-215.1>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne’s Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non-commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.



IN MEMORIAM

Edward H. “Jed” Burt, Jr., 1948–2016

Jack M. Stenger^{1*} and Sean M. Williams²

¹ Department of Biological Sciences, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

² Department of Zoology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, USA

* Corresponding author: jackstenger@gmail.com

Published January 4, 2017

When Jed was a child, his younger sister spied him playing football with a group of neighborhood boys. She rushed to their mother and reported the alarming news; because of his chronic health conditions, football was a dangerous activity for Jed. His mother sighed and told his sister not to worry: “He may not have a long life, but at least he can live a full life.” Jed recounted this story to us while in hospice and reflected that his mother would be proud. When Jed passed away on April 27, 2016, five days after his 68th birthday, he had indeed lived a full life. Jed’s passion for birds fueled a career that balanced innovative research, caring and thoughtful teaching, and a remarkable record of service to the North American ornithological societies. Jed always looked forward to ornithological conferences, where he could reunite with friends and colleagues who treasured his humor, humility, and charisma.

Jed’s passion for birds was kindled at the age of six when, standing on the family couch, he could see an American Robin nest through the living-room window. He began observing and identifying birds at his feeders, and on his 13th birthday he graduated from his 3× opera glasses and Chester Reed’s *Guide to Land Birds* to his father’s Navy-issue 7 × 50 Bausch and Lomb binoculars and Peterson’s *Field Guide to the Birds*. His pursuit of new species took him farther afield, to places such as Plum Island, Massachusetts, where he once trudged a mile through a slushy salt marsh for his life Snowy Owl, only to see 22 more throughout the day, some perched on guard rails along the road. His passion for bird-watching and note-taking quickly evolved into a pursuit of ornithology, and Jed published his first bird censuses in *Audubon Field Notes* while still in high school.

When he arrived at Bowdoin College as a freshman, Jed was already a fledgling ornithologist. He soon began research on the behavioral and physical development of Tree Swallows, which became his favorite species and one that he would study throughout his career. In addition to working with swallows, he completed his senior honor’s thesis (with advisor Chuck Huntington) on the population



Jed Burt, circa 2013. Photo credit: Pam Burt

dynamics of Leach’s Storm-Petrel, and he graduated with an A.B. in 1970.

Jed’s interest in bird behavior led him to work with Jack Hailman at the University of Wisconsin, where he obtained an M.S. in 1973 and a Ph.D. in 1977. He began his doctoral research on the neuroethology of Black-legged Kittiwakes, but more than a year into his project the lab in which he was conducting his neurological research relocated, rendering his research infeasible. During a road-trip conversation with Hailman, Jed realized how little was known about the evolution of animal coloration and

decided to pursue the research program that would lead to his doctoral thesis, “An analysis of physical, physiological and optical aspects of avian coloration with emphasis on Wood Warblers.” This research was transformative because it experimentally tested multiple adaptive hypotheses for bird coloration of both feathers and bare parts. Jed explored the function of the nonoptical properties of pigments and suggested that color may be an indirect result of evolution and not a direct adaptation in many contexts.

After a yearlong visiting professorship at the University of Tennessee, Jed was hired as a professor at Ohio Wesleyan University, where he taught ornithology for 37 years. Jed’s undergraduate research experience at Bowdoin sparked his career in ornithology, and he sought to provide young ornithologists with similar research opportunities throughout his teaching career. His favorite research collaborators were his students, and he coauthored papers and presentations with more than 63 different undergraduate students while at Ohio Wesleyan. He believed that it was his job to set a high bar for his students and do everything he could to help them surpass it. Once a month, Jed invited students to his house to band birds as a part of his ongoing research program. He always made breakfast (usually coffee cake or scones with mulled cider and coffee) and lunch for the participants. As we ate, we enjoyed the birds at his well-stocked feeders in the loving, inclusive atmosphere that Jed fostered. Perhaps this is why so many of Jed’s students ended up marrying each other, a fact he often cited. In 2006, Jed received Ohio Wesleyan’s highest teaching honor, the Welch Meritorious Teaching Award. In 2011, he received the Ohio Professor of the Year Award by the Kresge Foundation for the Support of Higher Education and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.

At Ohio Wesleyan, Jed’s research continued to focus on bird coloration. He approached his research with an open mind, boundless enthusiasm, and a keen eye. When in the field, he always carried his yellow waterproof notebook with him. After keeping extensive notes for more than 40 years, his stack of notebooks now stands twice his height. Jed was a strong proponent of short communications in ornithology, and his field notes provided the source material for long-term studies and numerous publications on unique bird behaviors, such as Cedar Waxwings foraging in abandoned spider webs or, perhaps his favorite, head-scratching behavior (“over-wing or under-wing?”).

In 1993, Jed’s research career took an unexpected turn when a microbiologist colleague, Jann Ichida, walked into his office—Jed *always* had an open door and an inviting armchair for visitors—with an obscure article on feather-degrading bacteria in poultry. By the time Jann left the office, a collaboration had formed. Within a year, Jed and his students were the first to isolate feather-degrading

bacteria from wild birds. For the rest of his career, Jed’s research was focused on how feather-degrading bacteria could act as a selective force on bird coloration, molt, and plumage maintenance behavior. He and Ichida even obtained two patents on a composting process for feather waste from the poultry industry. Jed used this long-term research project as the subject for a freshman tutorial in avian microbiology, which launched many students’ research careers. This course exemplified Jed’s dedication to interdisciplinary collaboration and research-based education. The study of plumage microbiota remains an active field of inquiry, which began with Jed’s open-door policy and creativity.

Jed was a firm believer in presenting research at every ornithological meeting he attended. In 1991, he had no current research to present at the annual meeting of the Association of Field Ornithologists, so he presented a poster on Alexander Wilson because he had heard little about the “Father of American Ornithology.” A couple of years later, Jed was contacted by the Harvard University library system and asked to verify the creator of drawings found in two arithmetic books of Wilson’s students. Jed wondered why they contacted him—he was no expert. After asking around, his peers insisted that he was the de facto Wilson scholar, a mantle he embraced for the rest of his career, culminating in the 2013 publication of his and William Davis’s *Alexander Wilson: The Scot Who Founded American Ornithology* (Belknap Press), an analysis of Wilson’s contributions to ornithology and American thought. *Alexander Wilson: Enlightened Naturalist* (Bucknell University Press), which Jed edited and to which he contributed a chapter, is currently in press. Jed enjoyed telling stories about Wilson, including one in which Wilson sold his skiff, *The Ornithologist*, to a Kentuckian, who wondered why he had named it after some “Indian chief.” Jed ended his Alexander Wilson talks with a Wilson quote about a vast flock of Passenger Pigeons streaming over the Ohio River. His voice would always quaver on the last line: “so that the whole, with its glittery undulation, marked a space on the face of the heavens resembling the windings of a vast and majestic river.”

Another dimension of Jed’s contributions to ornithology was his extraordinary record of service to American ornithological societies. He is the only person to have served as president of three of these societies (Association of Field Ornithologists, 1991–1993; Wilson Ornithological Society [WOS], 1997–1999; and American Ornithologists’ Union [AOU], 2008–2010), and he worked tirelessly throughout his career on various committees of the AOU. These included the Committee on Bylaws, the Committee on the Election of Fellows and Elective Members, and the Committee on Ornithology and the Law. He served as associate editor for *The Auk*, as “In Memoriam” editor for *The Auk* and *The Condor*, and as

review editor and editor for *Journal of Field Ornithology*. He also served as an associate editor of *Ibis*, the journal of the British Ornithologists' Union. He was elected a Fellow of the AOU in 1988 and received a Presidential Citation from the AOU in 2006 for his many contributions to the society. In 2013, he received the Margaret Morse Nice Medal, the premiere ornithological award of the WOS for lifetime contributions to ornithology. In 2016, WOS introduced the Jed Burtt Mentoring Grants, which provide research- and meeting-related travel funds for undergraduate-mentor teams. For years, Jed championed the merger of the AOU with other North American ornithological societies, and that continuing process is one of the many legacies of his leadership. Jed also encouraged amateur contributions to ornithology; he founded the Delaware County Bird Club (Ohio) and editing its newsletter for 26 years.

Jed's ornithological accomplishments are impressive, but they should not overshadow his embodiment of the liberal arts. Jed was an engaged citizen with a drawer in his filing cabinet full of letters to local and national politicians. He served on the board of the Ohio Alliance for the Environment, over which he presided for two years, which culminated in 1996 with his receipt of the President's Award for Contributions to Environmental Education. During the last year of his life, he worked to preserve the riparian greenbelt behind his retirement home, where he would lead

volunteer bird walks to educate other residents. He also served on the Board of Directors of United Way of Delaware and was an avid patron of theater and music, serving for over 30 years on the Board of Trustees of the Central Ohio Symphony Orchestra. Part of Jed's attraction to Alexander Wilson was the fact that he was able to study art history and poetry alongside ornithology. One cannot help but note the similarities between Jed and Wilson. Both were visionary ornithologists, encouraging educators, prolific writers, lovers of art and nature, and proactive members of their communities with a strong sense of justice.

Jed is survived by his wife, Pam, his children, Jeremy and Michelle, and hundreds of students who remained his close friends long after their graduation, and who still eagerly share Jed stories whenever they reunite. One of our favorites is the time when we set a record with Jed on his annual Big Day fundraiser (170 species). As we returned to campus late in the night after 20 hours of birding, we jokingly told Jed that we should take a victory lap through campus. Minutes later, Jed, driving the college van, jumped the curb and cruised down the pedestrian-only boulevard through the center of campus in a bout of euphoria not typical in ornithology. Jed requested that any contributions in his name be in support of Ohio Wesleyan's Natural History Museum, which he co-curated with students.

Memorials Editor: Ted Anderson, ted020@centurytel.net