



IN MEMORIAM

## George Matthew Jonkel, 1927–2016

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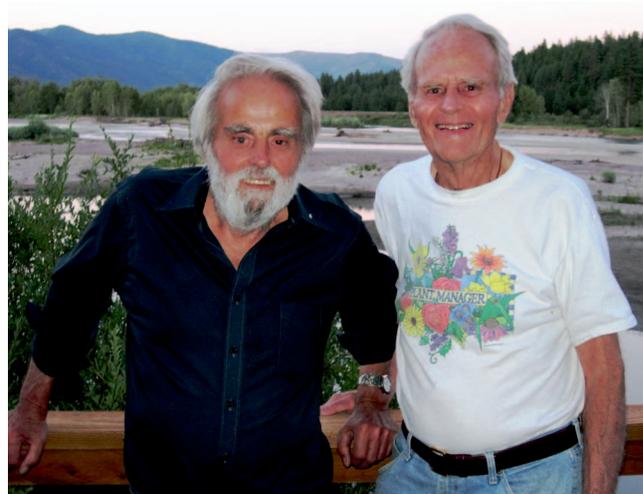
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George Matthew Jonkel, an Elective Member of the AOU who served for 17 years as chief of the Bird Banding Laboratory in Laurel, Maryland, passed away on November 20, 2016, at Bay Medical Center, Panama City, Florida. George's 89 years of life were characterized by being an outstanding wildlife conservationist and a stalwart steward of the environment. In his last year of life, he was in and out of hospitals for various reasons and finally lost his valiant fight to congestive heart failure.

George was born in Chicago, Illinois, on July 8, 1927, to George M., Sr., and Ruby Jonkel. His family moved to Wisconsin, where he graduated from Neillsville High School. After graduation, he served in the U.S. Army and Army Reserves from 1946 until 1952. He preferred to be called "Duke" by close friends and family, but most professionals knew him simply as George, or with great respect as Mr. Jonkel.

In 1948, George married his close partner and friend, Jean Dickson. Jean was a strong, spirited woman who had grown up on a homestead in Roundup, Montana, until drought and the depression forced the family to move to Missoula. George and Jean were married at her sister's home in Hamilton, Montana, and attended college together while raising children. Their marriage of 57 years produced four daughters, one son, three grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. Jean died on November 5, 2005.

George began college at the University of Minnesota but soon transferred to the University of Montana, where he received a B.S. in 1952 and an M.S. in wildlife technology in 1954. Jean earned an advanced degree at Montana at the same time. George started his professional career with the Montana Fish and Game Department and then worked with the U.S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife in Bismarck, North Dakota. In 1963, he transferred to Huron, South Dakota, and set up the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (FWS) Wetlands Acquisition Office for the preservation of waterfowl habitat. While working in South Dakota, he served as chairman of the South Dakota chapter of The Nature Conservancy, as secretary of the



**George Jonkel** (right) with his brother, Charles "Chuck" Jonkel, at 2010 family reunion in Missoula, Montana, celebrating Chuck's 80th birthday.

Raptor Research Foundation, and as an officer of The Wildlife Society. He joined the AOU (in 1962; Elective Member since 1985) and the South Dakota Ornithologists' Union (1959–2016). George wrote several articles for *South Dakota Bird Notes*. He was also a member of the Association of Field Ornithology since 1983 and was continually active throughout his career in several local conservation organizations and professional societies.

In August 1971, George became chief of the Bird Banding Laboratory (BBL) in the FWS Office of Migratory Bird Management, located at Patuxent Research Refuge in Laurel, Maryland. The BBL later became part of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center of the FWS and, ultimately part of the U.S. Geological Survey, all at the same location. During George's tenure as chief of BBL, there was growing interest in nongame birds, which resulted in markedly increased banding. The Endangered Species Act of 1973 also stimulated interest in banding as more research studies were initiated to learn about declining bird populations. The research conducted by

academic banders and other scientists increased the need for auxiliary markers, including colored leg bands, neck collars, and radio transmitters, which greatly taxed the small BBL staff.

George believed that bird banding was an integral part of wildlife conservation education, and he believed in liberal permitting processes for qualified banders. He articulated this belief in a talk entitled “The Bird Banding Laboratory and Encouragement of Amateur Ornithologists” at a meeting at Cornell University in 1978. This philosophy resulted in what some critics referred to as “hobby banding.” George’s philosophy on banding had strong support in the general banding community, while others thought it overburdened the small staff of the BBL. A review panel established in the mid-1990s studied permit-granting practices and many other issues and produced a document in 1998 commonly referred to as the “Buckley Report” (for Dr. Paul Buckley, panel chair). Since 1998, applicants for banding permits need to justify their need for a banding permit on the basis of a research program that identified the birds that they plan to band.

George, however, was just as supportive of scientific studies, and many researchers can recall how he went out of his way to assist in getting bands and authorization for scientific studies. In 1978, he reported on “Banding as a Tool in Bird Studies” in the *Proceedings of the Second North American Conference on Common Loon Research and Management*. George was quoted in a 1982 *New York Times* article that discussed the controversy about whether banding birds was cruel. He defended the practice and stated that we only learned of the decline of Common Loon populations from banding, and that banding was also providing evidence of the different migration schedules and routes of males and females of the same species.

During his tenure as chief of BBL, George also contributed to the advancement of scientific bird banding and bird population studies in other countries, working with ornithologists in Brazil, India, and China in establishing their banding programs. He traveled to Antarctica for a penguin research study. The trip resulted in a publication (with George A. Llano as junior coauthor) that reported the southernmost nesting of Emperor Penguins on the appropriately named Inaccessible Island. An intrepid and inquisitive traveler, he made new contacts and forged many close friendships in distant parts of the world.

After retirement from the FWS in 1988, George and Jean moved to Fountain, Florida, where they raised blueberries and grapes and enjoyed their new roles as Florida naturalists. George had a fascination with building

labyrinths on his property and encouraging others to do the same on their properties. When I saw an elaborate labyrinth on the remote Block Island in Rhode Island, I immediately called George to report my finding. I was amazed when he told me that he not only knew of it, but had visited it.

George maintained a close relationship throughout his life with his brother, Dr. Charles Jonkel, a professor and pioneering bear biologist in Montana. George accompanied his brother on several research trips to Churchill, Manitoba, and other research sites. I was pleased to serendipitously have a surprise encounter with them in Churchill when a group I was leading made its traditional stop for adult beverages. I was proud to introduce the 20 ecotourists to the famous Jonkel brothers. Charles was a renowned scientist on polar bear biology in Churchill. The brothers shared a mutual admiration for each other and their respective professions. They also enjoyed reunions in Montana with their extended families. Charles died in April 2016, and in spite of his many medical issues, George took the time to write and mail tributes to his brother to me and other friends.

Few wildlife biologists have been as fortunate as George to live such a productive life, full of adventure and close associations with an incredible number of colleagues. In spite of his accomplishments and friendships, however, George’s life can be described as a life totally consumed with creating a better planet for humans and wildlife.

George was extremely generous with his time and his money. One of his assistants in the BBL told me how George had purchased new tires for his car when he encountered financial problems. It didn’t surprise me when, while reviewing material for this tribute, I was told by the Patuxent librarian of an April 2015 article in *Mad World News* entitled “Young Black Man’s Car Broke Down, Elderly White Man Does the Unexpected.” The article quoted the recipient of George’s kindness, who recounted his unfortunate situation of being lost in Panama City, Florida, with a flat tire, no spare, and no one offering assistance. The man, who described himself as “a six foot six inch Black man with tattoos,” was surprised, therefore, when “he” showed up to offer assistance. The “he” was “an 88-year old White man” whose name was George M. Jonkel. George drove the man to Sears, purchased a tire for his car, had it mounted, and remained on site so he could also pay for a full tank of gas. That is the George Jonkel who touched innumerable lives and is greatly missed by many. I am blessed to have been his colleague and friend for more than 45 years.

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