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IN MEMORIAM

Richard Fourness Johnston, 1925–2014

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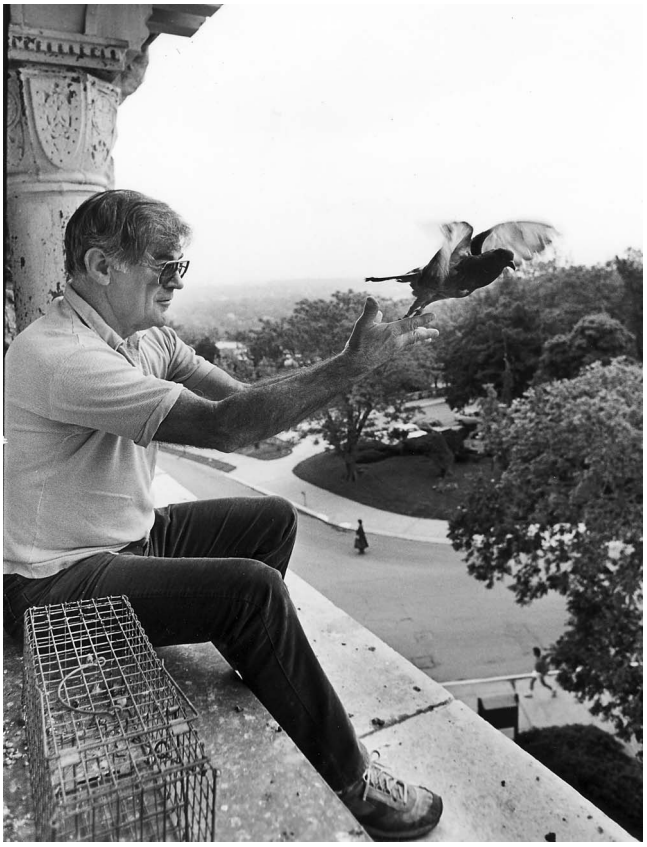
It is humbling to review the more than half a century of contributions to ornithology made by Professor Richard F. Johnston (hereafter, Richard). Those of us who knew him as a graduate advisor marveled at the depth of his intellect, his work ethic, and his commitment to the discipline, but our deepest admiration was reserved for the time, support, and role-modeling he provided for us as we developed our scientific and life skills.

Richard was born in Oakland, California, to Marie Whitney (née Johnson) and Arthur Nathaniel Johnston, a San Francisco Bay Area optician. There is an irony in his mother's maiden name, as the 't' in Johnston was often overlooked during Richard's career. In a review of *Avian Biology Volume 1*, he pointed out how good the book was, but noted "that my friend Richard E. Johnson and I have been erroneously synonymized" (*Auk 89*:465–467).

Richard's interest in nature started early with collections of invertebrates that soon began to fill his parents' garage. His father wisely discouraged the collection of vertebrates. Before Richard was 13, he casually observed birds to earn a Boy Scout merit badge, and later participated in many overnight birding trips into the Sierras and to Monterey Bay with the Boy Scouts. In 1938, his father had a change of heart and spent $40 on a bird taxidermy correspondence course for Richard. To obtain specimens, he would take his .22 rifle, broken down and wrapped in a burlap bag and hung on the horizontal crossbar of his bicycle, on his collecting trips. Family members recall that he had quite a collection—including hawks, falcons, a pheasant, and a roadrunner—but "unfortunately" they deteriorated and were thrown away during his absence in the army. Perhaps not enough preservatives in the mounts, or perhaps not enough room in the garage for his father's car.

Richard joined the army at age 18 in 1943 and trained at Fort Benning, Georgia. He later mentioned to one of his students, Peter Lowther, that he was trained as a mortar man for the assault on Okinawa, but was instead deployed to Europe in response to the Battle of the Bulge (December 1944 to January 1945). He was wounded in Europe, and the injury gave him a characteristic limp, but that never kept him from an active field and outdoor life.

Richard enrolled at the University of California Berkeley in 1946 and majored in zoology. He was accepted into graduate school at Berkeley, earning M.A. and Ph.D. (in 1955) degrees under the tutelage of Alden H. Miller, a student of Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) founder Joseph Grinnell. Richard's research skills were honed in what must have been an extraordinarily stimulating



Richard Johnston, on his office ledge, releasing a color-banded pigeon. Photo Credit: University Archives, University of Kansas Libraries

environment at the MVZ in the early 1950s. Miller's other students at the time included future ornithological luminaries Thomas A. Howell, Keith L. Dixon, and Robert K. Selander. Richard's studies of the population structure of subspecies of Song Sparrows residing in saltmarshes surrounding San Francisco Bay stimulated his lifelong interest in both geographic variation and evolutionary systematics in birds. Following a two-year appointment at New Mexico State University, Richard was hired as curator of ornithology at the University of Kansas Museum of Natural History (MNH) in 1958 by its redoubtable director, E. Raymond Hall, himself a former Berkeley student of Joseph Grinnell. Richard was charged with building a graduate program in ornithology, and 34 years and 39 M.A. and Ph.D. students later he 'successfully' retired in 1992.

Richard's dissertation led to significant contributions to population ecology published in *The Condor,* but for several years from 1958 to 1963 his output consisted primarily of traditional reports on distribution and behavior of a variety of birds and other taxa. In 1964, however, Richard and Robert Selander 'broke' the story of their discovery of rapid adaptive change in North American populations of the introduced House Sparrow (*Science 143*:548–550). This was followed by a series of six "Evolution in the House Sparrow" papers from 1967 to 1978 (I–III with R. K. Selander and VI with Suzanne Hamilton), documenting in detail the morphological variation and adaptation of the species to North American environments. The House Sparrow project was funded by a series of NSF grants, and produced six Ph.D.s and several M.A.s from Richard's students. Their numerous publications (some co-authored with Richard) in various ornithological journals as well as *Systematic Zoology*, *Evolution*, *Science*, and *Nature* attest to quality of this research.

Richard was named a Fellow of the AAAS in 1964 and of the AOU in 1967, and was a lifetime Honorary Member of the Cooper Ornithological Society. He was also one of five founding members of the IBP Working Group on Granivorous Birds (along with Charles Kendeigh, J. D. Summers-Smith, Jan Pinowski, and F. J Turcek). He and Robert Selander shared the 1975 Elliot Coues Award from the American Ornithologists' Union for their pioneering House Sparrow research. Part of the citation reads "The influence of their work is not only of great ornithological significance but has provided new insights to the understanding of natural selection and the evolutionary process." An academic generation later, two of Richard's Ph.D. students also received AOU recognition of their ornithological research (Sievert Rohwer received the Coues Award in 2006 and Robert Fleischer received the Brewster Medal in 2012).

To his credit, although Richard's research focus increasingly reflected the developing rigor of hypothesis testing and the influence of quantitative and ultimately genetic methods in ecology and systematics, he continued to produce publications of interest to the amateur naturalist and the birding community in Kansas. Richard edited the *Kansas Ornithological Society (KOS) Bulletin* from 1958 to 1969, served on its Board of Directors from 1996 to 1998, and was awarded an honorary life membership in the society in 2011 and the Ivan L. Boyd Recognition Award in 2012. He authored or co-authored 23 papers for the *KOS Bulletin* and made numerous presentations at annual meetings. He wrote the widely used *Directory of the Bird-Life of Kansas* (1960), *The Breeding Birds of Kansas* (1964), and *A Directory to the Birds of Kansas* (1965), all published by the MNH.

Later in his career, Richard turned his attention to another introduced species, the Rock Pigeon (or feral pigeon). He published numerous papers on pigeon biology culminating in co-authorship of the monograph *Feral Pigeons* (Oxford University Press) with Marián Janiga in 1995. Why the focus on House Sparrows and feral pigeons? This interest could date back to the challenge issued by Grinnell in 1919 to study the experiment afforded by the introductions of House Sparrows into North America (*American Naturalist 53*:468–472). Undoubtedly, the close association of *Passer* and *Columba* with man leads to some interesting experimental hypotheses, and large sample sizes are possible for banding and collecting—no permits needed! Richard acknowledged his lifelong interest in these two "avian symbionts" in one of his last major contributions (pages 49–67 in *Avian Ecology and Conservation in an Urbanizing World,* Kluwer Academic, 2001). Jim Rising, long-time professor at the University of Toronto and Richard's Ph.D. student in the early 1960s, related a story that may complete the picture. He recalls that the eminent, but irascible E. R. Hall, Director of the MNH (and Richard's boss) asserted, in contrast to Grinnell, that: "nothing useful would come from research on an introduced species." I can see Richard being 'inspired' to take up that challenge!

Richard's sabbaticals were mostly spent in Europe—University of Parma 1965, Oxford 1966, Sussex 1981, and Parma again in 1989. These were relevant to the problems of evolution in House Sparrows and Rock Pigeons and afforded him the chance to connect with European counterparts, resulting in several published collaborations. The Italian experience undoubtedly also helped Richard with his viniculture projects that he took up later in his career and after retirement on his farm in Franklin County, Kansas.

Another aspect of Richard's professional life was his role as a major editor and reviewer. This likely began when, as a grad student, he assisted Alden Miller with his duties as the Editor of *The Condor*. True to form, his students also have served as editors of major journals, books, and

symposium volumes. Richard was Editor of *Systematic Zoology* from 1967 to 1970, but where he stands apart was in his willingness to tackle challenging multidisciplinary editing assignments. He was founding and lead editor of both *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* (*ARES*) from 1968 to 1992 and *Current Ornithology* from 1981 to 1987. In his review of the first volume of *Current Ornithology* J. P. Myers noted ". . . it is an outstanding collection . . . it will stimulate, aggravate, incite, and excite every professional ornithologist. Buy it and be prepared to shell out more for subsequent numbers" (*Auk 102*:663–664). Norman Slade, retired professor and curator of mammalogy at the MNH recalled that "at KU the Zoology department had become the department of Systematics and Ecology and, as reflected in the preface to the first volume of *ARES*, some people thought this a strange combination. Richard . . . and others saw the merging of the two fields as an excellent vehicle for broader training of students who might think of themselves as primarily ecologists or systematists."

A part of Richard's legacy that is reflected in the transition from Zoology to Systematics and Ecology is his influence on the changing role of museum collections and specimen-based research in ornithology. Specimens, primarily study skins, have always been used for publications on morphology, taxonomy, and distribution, but the value of skeletons, the use of multivariate statistics in examining size and shape, the preservation of tissues, all were in their infancy in the 1960s when Richard was building his House Sparrow collection. He should be recognized for changing the job description of a curator of ornithology and for influencing a cohort of students to carry on the scientific use and modernization of ornithology collections around the continent.

Richard's manuscript and book reviews were thorough and tough, but fair; and he was one of the ornithological community's 'go-to' reviewers for comprehensive textbooks and monographs. As Program Director in Systematic Biology for the NSF in 1968–1969, he reviewed many funding proposals. For students, sending a draft manuscript to Richard for review was always terrifying, but invariably a constructive and positive experience.

In 2011, as Richard's illness was becoming apparent, a number of his former graduate students wrote letters to him thanking him for his influence on their lives and careers. In these, we can truly appreciate his impact and the ongoing contributions his mentorship is making to the field of ornithology. I will not identify individuals for fear of leaving someone out, but their observations range from being saved from a bad relationship with another advisor, to being housed, given access to a treasured green Ford Mustang for field work, to being introduced to multivariate statistics, good food, or good wine, to being coached, guided, and challenged. As several pointed out, Richard never told you what to do, he simply made suggestions, often by changing the subject to lead you to solve your own problem. This was the template for his lectures and seminars—storytelling and sidebars that contained the 'big' ideas, when you caught on. A number of students, including some who worked on *Passer* research, asked Richard if he would co-author papers arising from their graduate research. He regularly refused saying simply "It's your project"—even though his contributions to the work had been substantial.

All of his graduate students give him considerable credit for preparing them for a successful career both in and out of academia. His University of Kansas colleagues and research collaborators echo the same sentiments; he was respected as a scientist, valued as a friend, and admired for his balanced perspective on life.

Richard died on November 15, 2014, in Lawrence, Kansas. He was pre-deceased by his wife Lora Lee and is survived by three daughters, Cassie, Janet, and Regan, and grandsons Miles and Winn McEnery.

My thanks go to Janet and Cassie for filling in the gaps in the record of Richard's early life and to Katie Sparks at the MNH and Kathy Lafferty at the KU Kenneth Spencer Research Library for unearthing some historical records. I appreciate the thoughtful comments of Peter Lowther, Edward Murphy, James Rising, David Seibel, and Norman Slade in preparation of this memorial, and to Ted Anderson for the opportunity to write it.

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