

## **A Tribute to John W. Johnson (1914–2010)**

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## TRIBUTE

*Journal of the Lepidopterists' Society*  
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### A TRIBUTE TO JOHN W. JOHNSON (1914–2010)



*“To walk the fields or coastline with John was to find instant recall of everything moving and growing.”*  
—Kenneth G. Denton, Jr.

John Warren Johnson, conservationist, biologist, lepidopterist, teacher and friend, was born to Lulu May Berryman and John Waldo (“Brownie”) Johnson on May 12, 1914, in Olinda, California. He was raised in the small farm town of Fullerton, in the heart of Orange County, California. In John’s day, it was a rural America; complete with farm chores, a tiny one-room school house, and vast ranch lands to explore. Dirt roads enriched with acres of orange groves, walnut groves, the fragrance of wildflowers and orange blossoms called out to John for exploration from the porch of his ranch up into the wilds of the Santa Ana Mountains and back down to the pristine tide pools and beaches. John was born to study the acres of nature that blanketed the upper Newport Bay and surrounding San Joaquin Hills.

In 1918, the Johnson Family took temporary residency in Newport Beach, while preparing for life as walnut growers in Fullerton, California. The Johnson ranch land was purchased in 1919 and it was here, at age five, that John captured his first butterfly, a “Mourning Cloak” with his fingers. Little did he know that he had already caught “the bug.” It was in this world, while as a young farmer and an inquisitive high school student that he strengthened and grew into the strong thin man he remained for his entire life. It was also in this place where, at about age 12, he met a frail young man who lived on a nearby orchard, and so John befriended Erich Walter, thus beginning a lifetime of true friendship and camaraderie. No tribute of John W. Johnson would be complete without mentioning Erich

C. Walter. I always saw them as the “Lewis and Clark” of the Lepidoptera world, Erich with his keen eye and John with his fine analysis.

Imagine for a moment his days as a teenager. John and Erich would jump in Erich’s beefed up Model-A Ford and drive wildly down dirt roads in search of life. Erich had even wired up a train horn for that special “watch out, here we come!” effect (already a gifted electrician, Erich would later become a county electrician inspector and aviator). Some of that “life” was found right on the Walters’ farm. John became entranced with Erich’s father’s moth collection and later in life began his own fine Lepidoptera collection, while also working with Erich in curating one of the most comprehensive California moth collections ever privately assembled. In time, Erich C. Walter’s collection was donated to the California Academy of Sciences, and John W. Johnson’s collection was donated to The Los Angeles Museum of Natural History, where there exists Johnson’s twelve volumes of detailed field notes, abstracts, manuscript drafts, rearing records and photographs; a must read for any student of *Catocala* and California Lepidoptera.

After graduation from Fullerton High, John dabbled at studies at Fullerton Junior College and continued to faithfully work on the family farm. But he was anxious to strike out on his own. His opportunity came in 1934. The Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) was recruiting young men for the physical ardors and “romance” of cleaning and opening forest lands at Jones Springs and Lytle Creek in the San Gabriel

Mountains. John joined up and spent most of his time at Camp Lytle Creek. By May of 1935, his unit, known as Company 908, was moved to the recently declared Death Valley National Monument. One of only 12 companies employed during the great depression, the Company lived in tents at an altitude of 4,175 feet in Wildrose Canyon in the Panamint Mountains. On a weekend collecting outing he climbed Telescope Peak (11,045 ft.) and in nearby Tuber Canyon Spring he netted a unique variation of *Melitaea palla* that he called "The Death Valley Checker Spot." John claimed, "This was one of the happiest times in my life."

John stayed with the C.C.C. for about a year, acting as an educational advisor and toning his already strong and lean build. He also developed what those who met him could affectionately call "The Handshake." He took great pride in letting you know that he was shaking your hand and you sure did feel it! While John is certainly not listed on any C.C.C. registry of immortality, he did however find immortality in the Lepidoptera world with the discovery of his "Death Valley Checker Spot." In August of 1935, he resigned from the C.C.C. to go back to school.

John continue his education at U.C. Berkley, where in 1938, he earned his Bachelor of Science Degree in Entomology. While at Berkley, John published "Three Butterflies" (Johnson 1936a). It was his first of a lifetime of over twenty professional articles and publications which included seven pertaining to the *Catocala* and two on Saturniidae. The "Three Butterflies" was a description of three species of *Vanessa* that John observed during a hike to the top of Telegraph Peak near Death Valley when he was in the C.C.C., namely: (a) West Coast Lady (*V. carye*); (b) Painted Lady (*V. cardui*); and (c) Virginia Lady (*V. viginensis*). He observed this interesting record of three species of the same genus that had very different geographical ranges coming together on a high desert peak. He was a pioneer of the study of "Hilltopping", which many years later would be detailed in a work pertaining to Dictionary Hill, in San Diego, California. John's second publication was about dragonfly eggs, "A Dragonfly Lays its Eggs." (Johnson 1936b). His third professional publication described "Notes on *Catocala piatrix* race *dionyza*" (Johnson 1938a) and his fourth publication pertained to the aforementioned Death Valley Checker Spot "A New Subspecies of *Melitaea palla*" (Johnson 1938b).

We must jump back a decade to the fall of 1928, when Sequoia National Park Ranger Robert "Bob" Fry (who would later teach biology at Newport Harbor High School) while working at Three Rivers captured a Saturniid moth in a lighted store window. Having been acquainted with the Walters on their earlier visits to the

Sequoia Park, Fry mailed the specimen to Erich Walter who then handed it over to John Johnson. This was the first specimen of *Saturnia albofasciata* later described and named by Johnson in 1938 (Johnson 1938c). This was no simple find, no drab unremarkable species. *Albofasciata* is a remarkable beauty, with a brick red male flying only at dusk in the fall and a frosty white female caught flying to about ten at night in October, even with snow on the ground. John had also independently discovered an unknown Saturniid larvae at Toll Road Camp in the San Bernardino Mountains and was already "on the trail" of this new species. Later, at Toll Road Camp, more *albofasciata* females were captured, with Erich at blacklights yielding eggs and caterpillars, permitting a detailed instar study. Males were later lured in with newly hatched females (before pheromone "collecting").

In the late thirties and early forties vast sections of forested lands were turning brown and dying. This was a desperate time and the logging industry near Mt. Lassen was losing hundreds of acres of wilderness pines. John Johnson came to the rescue. In 1939, John joined the United States Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine. He was assigned to the Forest Insect Investigation Unit and went off to the forests of northern California. During his four year tenure he and his colleagues solved the mystery. It was not the bark beetles themselves that were killing the pine trees, rather it was a fungus spore they carried. In his "spare" time John wrote an article on *Calosaturnia meridionalis* (Johnson 1940).

Fifteen years earlier in March of 1925, on a summer family outing in Santiago Canyon in the Santa Ana Mountains, Erich's brother, Werner Walter, had collected a large brown moth. Later, Erich gave this to John for study and he described it as a new species. This was later the subject of a joint authorship by Hogue and Johnson entitled "A New Name for *Calosaturnia meridionalis*." (Hogue & Johnson 1940). John also dabbled in chemistry, drafting an article entitled "Silver Nitrate as a Stain for Use of Conduction of Liquids in Wood" (Johnson 1941). John left the Forest Service in 1942 and performed some biology graduate work, earned his teaching certificate and moved back to Orange County, California to be closer to his family and to begin what was to become a full career as a parent, teacher and lepidopterist.

John began teaching Biology at Newport Harbor High School in 1942 and continued his call for conservation. He was a huge proponent of field trips. Taking classes to the La Brea Tar Pits; the Scripps Institute of Oceanography; Modjeska Canyon's Bird Sanctuary; the San Diego Zoo and of "collecting trips" to local tide

pools, where he asked his students to collect only one specimen and not the bags full of wasted marine life collected by bus loads of schoolchildren in the 50's and 60's along Orange County's coastline. He is quoted as saying, "If we destroy the seas and its inhabitants, we will destroy ourselves along with it and much more quickly than we could with an atom bomb." His concern for marine life and its human interdependence was only one factor leading to his earning the 1947 California Governor's Award for his conservation efforts.

Like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting, John's classrooms were filled with aquariums, plant presses, insect nets, collections, jars, posters, graphs, books, cages and various critters alive and preserved. He made life jump out at you and always while smiling. When he found or caught something new, that became the "Theme of the Day." After class he would stay as long as any student needed and one could often hear him say, with that gentle smile of his that, "teaching is like being a parent, it never ends." He loved it, and his students loved and respected him. The Newport Harbor High School's 1958 Yearbook was dedicated in his honor.

However, 1948 was also a very special year for John, while as a young biology teacher he met a shy math teacher, who also taught at Newport Harbor High School. John W. Johnson married Ruth B. Daniell in June of '48. (...and in secret, so they wouldn't be hazed by their students!) All who knew Ruth will never forget the twinkle in her eyes and her high energy. It was as though she was always running to get some milk and cookies just for you, but if you didn't do your homework...watch out! They were a match made in heaven and before long moved into a modest home in nearby Corona del Mar. There, over the next forty-two years, they would raise a family of three talented and educated sons, John, Norman and Nelson, watch their families and grandchildren grow and inspire the lives of hundreds of students, friends and colleagues, many of whom went on to a life in science or science-related fields. One such inspired was Douglass R. Miller, who in 1967 named a new species of Homoptera; *Oregmopyga johnsoni* in John's honor (Miller 1967). A.E. Brower would also honor John by the naming of *Catocala johnsoniana* (Brower 1976).

Currently, eldest son John lives in Santa Barbara with his wife Mary and their children. He is a professor and anthropologist at Santa Barbara's Museum of Natural History. Second born son Norman, a writer at heart, lives with his wife Julie in Costa Mesa, where they founded Newport Custom Woodworking in 1988 and is the master cabinet maker. Youngest son Nelson lives with his wife Mariel in New York and is a successful partner in a major environmental law firm. As a proud



John and Ruth on a collecting trip, 1976.

father, one paragraph for his sons will not allow for all accomplishments, accolades and awards, however, let it be noted it is not a short list.

While living and teaching in Newport Beach during the 60's and 70's, John assumed the title of Assistant Research Biologist, (M.S.B, U.C.I.) and was also involved in a massive political undertaking spearheaded by the Museum Director of Systematic Biology at The University of California at Irvine, Gordon Marsh. John was active in assisting Gordon in establishing the first Orange County natural history museum (now defunct) and saving, what we currently call the "Upper Newport Bay." Again, using biology as a sword, they succeeded in convincing people (including The Irvine Company) of the importance of conserving such native wetlands. No small task considering the ever looming developers' interests. These lands are still preserved to this day waiting to be dedicated to these two gentlemen. From saving carpets of old northern growth pine trees to the saving of sea-bird feeding grounds in a southern California back-bay, John W. Johnson was truly a pioneering California conservationist—but he was also an outstanding lepidopterist!

By 1961, John W. Johnson was the recipient of a grant from The National Science Foundation and subsequently took a sabbatical and completed his Masters of Arts in Biology thesis at Humboldt State College in 1963. His studies were with an emphasis on plant ecology of Humboldt Bay's Natural Wildlife Preserve's sand dunes. His research led directly to funding from The Nature Conservancy, ultimately leading to the acquisition and preservation of significant additional wild lands into Humboldt Bay's Lanphere-Christensen Preserve. If his ever present sword could



have been engraved, it would read "biology" on one side and "conservationist" on the other (Johnson 1963).

Another study John often spoke about was of a small sand dune wasp who somehow could find its small sand hole even after flying hundreds of yards off. When items around the nest hole were moved, the wasp became lost. He and Erich often marveled at the wonders of nature, including the tiny butterfly chrysalis who could survive under ten feet of snow all winter long and the moth that flew day and night after living two years as larvae on a handful of leaves. It was John and Erich that I first heard say, "the future of automobiles is electric."

There was a new high school opening in Corona del Mar, and John jumped at the opportunity to be the first chairman of the science department. He taught biology and chemistry at C.D.M. High School from 1962 to his retirement in 1974. As it was at Harbor High School, his students loved and respected him. The Corona del Mar High School's 1962 and 1965 Yearbooks were dedicated in his honor. In 1968 John W. Johnson was elected "The Orange County Teacher of The Year." In 1969, John received the prestigious National Audubon Society's Conservation Award of Merit and in 1970 he was elected as "Orange County's Newport/Mesa School District Teacher of The Year." Yet John would always turn the topic back to you and yours, with a smile and a gentle head nod, upon being questioned about his many accolades. Besides always being a gentleman, he was also very humble in every way, except maybe that handshake of his! It was just something you never forgot.

Retirement in 1974 left John more time to travel across North America where he and Ruth and their good friends Erich and his (forever cheerful) wife Velda would explore distant desert and forest campgrounds, fully equipped with nets, black lights, a remarkable folding table & chairs, and a portable black light sheet frame, created by Erich, and of course their favorite game, Yahtzee.

John's first of many articles after retirement (eleven in all from 1978 to 1985) was a 1978 submitted study of *Catocala* wings. "Similarities and Differences in Forewing Shape of Six California *Catocala* Species." (Johnson 1978). John first became acquainted with *Catocala* by viewing Erich's father's collection. Later, with Erich, they reared and described many species and set forth unique observations and aspects associated with this group. In 1978, John Johnson and Erich Walter co-authored a parallel publication pertaining to *Catocala* forewings; "Similarities and Differences in Forewing Shape of Six California *Catocala* Species" (Johnson & Walter 1980).

After driving hours on rough forest dirt roads in his '55 Chevy, complete with seventeen inch rims and a dual battery system for black lighting, Erich Walter and yours truly, were finally black lighting in the Coxe Meadows of the San Bernardino Mountains of California. I'll never forget the cool evening breeze of June 1, 1965, or that suddenly around 9:00 p.m. what initially looked like just another *Coloradia pandora* hit the sheet. Instinctively, Erich's first words were, "This is something new." It was. In 1981, John Johnson and Erich Walter co-authored and described this moth as "*Coloradia velda*," named in honor of Erich's wife; "A New Species of *Coloradia* in California" (Johnson & Walter 1981).

*Gloveria medusa*, a remarkable sub-species, first caught by John blacklighting with Ruth July 1978, at Pinyon Flats in the Santa Rosa Mountains was also described and named by John Johnson in 1981; "A Desert Subspecies of *Gloveria medusa*." (Johnson 1981). These paratypes, along with John's Lepidoptera collection of some 7,000 meticulously pinned specimens were donated to the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History in 1982.

In between camping, rearing various species of *Catocala* and *Papilio*, assisting Erich with his *Papilio* genetic studies and donating his private collection, John found the time in 1982 to draft and have published two professional articles describing new food plants for butterflies. Namely, "Two food plant observations for *Euphydras chalcedona*" (Johnson 1982a) and "Another Food plant of *Erynnis tristis tristis*" (Johnson 1982b). Based upon a sighting in the East Bluffs of the upper Newport Back Bay in 1961, near the then present salt ponds, John produced a third article pertaining to an extinct California Satyridae and it too was published in 1982; "An Extinct Population of a Third Species of Southern California Satyrid" (Johnson 1982c). In 1983, John Johnson authored "Two New California *Catocala* Subspecies" (Johnson 1983).

John was a student of and mastered the genitalia dissection techniques of F.N. Pierce, F.E.S. and others. He developed new staining techniques for easier study and taxonomical research. He applied this discipline in 1884 and with Erich described immature *Catocala erichi* in what was to become a befitting last co-authorship between these lifelong friends, entitled, "The Immature Stages of *Catocala erichi*." (Johnson & Walter 1984). John also published an internal systems study in "*Ascapa* and *Catocala*" (Johnson 1984). His last professional article was "The Immature Stages of Six California *Catocala*." (Johnson 1985).

Both John and Erich were lifelong avid lepidopterists and active members of The Lorquin Entomological

Society at The Los Angeles Museum of Natural History (Erich for nearly seventy years). It goes without saying, that upon Erich's death on December 22, 1990, John truly mourned his loss. In 2001, he authored an eloquent tribute to his comrade Erich, "A Tribute to The Lepidopterist Erich Carl Walter" (Johnson 2001). That same year Ruth and John moved to Santa Barbara to be closer to their grandchildren. In 1991, John provided advice while assisting Lawrence Shaw, Ken Osborne and this author, Ken Denton, in preparing Erich C. Walter's collection of 14,178 meticulously pinned specimens for photographing and then donation. Erich's remarkable collection was officially accessioned into The California Academy of Sciences by Norman D. Penny on December 24, 1991.

In what could not have come at a better time in John Johnson's life, John was nominated by Ken Osborne, and others, and subsequently was the recipient of The 1963 John Adams Comstock Award. An eloquent tribute and publication index was written by Lawrence H. Shaw (Shaw 1993). John was unable to attend the award presentation due to the high altitude in Colorado and his breathing difficulties. However, John continued to be active in his comfort zones of biology, chemistry, conservation, paleontology, zoology, botany, entomology and, of course, preparatory and taxonomical studies in Lepidoptera. To walk the fields or coast line with John was to find instant recall of everything moving and growing. An encyclopedia of natural science even in his ageing years, he remained as comfortable in a remote forest as behind a microscope and just at ease discussing DNA or the birds and wildflowers of his area.

In 2003, after fifty-five years, John lost his beloved Ruth, but in spite of the irreplaceable loss he always took the time to write and meet with those interested in biology or Lepidoptera, whether students or friends he was always anxious to discuss collecting. At age 94, as head of the gardening committee, he took on the task of identifying and labeling the 124 species of plants located around his Santa Barbara retirement community. John delighted in showing off the monarch caterpillars and their colorful chrysalis hanging about his patio. Also hanging about were several Coastal Scrub Jays (*Aphelocoma californica*) he had tamed in exchange for peanuts, however, there was a particular velvet black American *Corvus brachyrhynchos* that one could say had "trained John."

He remained sharp and at peace until his passing on August 26, 2010, at the tender age of 96. He told me that he felt ready to fall from the tree of life. He is quoted as saying, "Understanding of the world around us and how we interact with it and each other is what biology is all about." In his many adventuresome letters

to this author, John would recollect his adventures and passions. Like his visit to Gene Stratton Porter's home, who wrote *Moths of the Limberlost*, or his outings with Erich in the late 20's into Orange County Park (now Irvine Park) in search of *Hemileuca electra* and discovering it does not fly to blacklights at night. "It is a moth I cherish," said John.

As a young lad, when I knocked on your door that fateful summer, how did you know to tell me, "Well, if it's that big, catch it and bring it back to me..." instead of showing me your drawer of tarantula hawk wasps you had already collected? How did you know it might take me all summer to spot it again, and that I'd spend weeks collecting everything else? Did it read "future lepidopterist on my forehead?" I don't think so. I think there are very few people born with the natural gifts and instincts you were given. Very few. It's rare, as rare as the *Glaucoopsyche lygdamus palosverdesensis*.

Thank you John; for lending me my first net, for introducing me to Erich Walter, and for teaching me the fascinating world of butterfly collecting. I'm not sure of the exact date the bug bit me, but it never let go. Above all, thank you "Mr. Johnson" for being my teacher and my friend.

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