

John B. (Jack) Holt, Jr. 1940–2019

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IN MEMORIAM
JOHN B. (JACK) HOLT, JR.
1940–2019



Jack with a Golden Eagle he captured at Kittatinny Ridge, Pennsylvania. The focus is on the eagle, as Jack would have wanted it. (Photo by Steve Lauer, 1978).

On 14 September 2019, the raptor world lost John B. (Jack) Holt, Jr., one of its greatest champions and a premier raptor bander. Jack was born in 1940, and grew up in Massachusetts with a boyhood interest in birds, particularly hawks, owls, eagles, and falcons native to the area. At the age of 18, he earned his banding permit, and began banding raptors at places such as Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania. In 1963, he met his friend Ron Austing, a naturalist and photographer from Cincinnati, Ohio, who offered Jack a job as a Park Ranger with Hamilton County Parks in Ohio. Later, they coauthored the book, *The World of the Great Horned Owl* (Austing and Holt 1966), which many readers attest remains contemporarily relevant to the species.

Jack spent all his free time banding birds and worked year-round: from nestling Great Horned Owls in the late winter, Red-tailed Hawks and Red-shouldered Hawks in the spring, Turkey Vultures in mid-summer, and at banding stations in the fall through early winter at migratory hot spots like Cape May, USA, and Point Pelee, Canada.

Jack was clearly one of the world's experts in tree-nest entries, and climbed trees into his 60s and 70s. Jack's climbing expertise and nuanced ability to get into difficult nests was much sought by collaborators. In 1980 Jack and his friend, the late Sergej Postupalsky (Washburn and De Simone 2017), were featured in *Sports Illustrated* for Sergej's eagle study, and Jack's work banding nestling Bald Eagles. This article brought attention to the athleticism and skill necessary to climb trees quickly and safely for raptor work, and in the instance of the photo shoot for the article, revealed a sketchy climb on a very dead snag (see Doherty 1980). Jack climbed to countless Bald Eagle nests to collect blood samples from nestlings in the Great Lakes area to help document levels of DDT/DDE and PCBs. Nest entries can be dangerous work indeed, and in his mid-60s and after countless other close calls with angry raptors, Jack was hit in the face by a Northern Goshawk while entering a nest and lost vision in one of his eyes.

In his later years, GD once asked Jack how many birds he had banded. Without hesitation, he responded "25,000." We now know Jack banded over 22,600 raptors under his own permit (BBL # 08083), and another 3800 raptors under other banders' permits in Wisconsin, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Montana. Over 10,000 of those banded raptors were nestlings. To anyone who has climbed one, a dozen, or several hundred trees to get into raptor nests, this number is simply phenomenal.

Jack served as a mentor for hundreds of young raptor enthusiasts who accompanied him on his many adventures to conduct hands-on research. Jack, like his contemporaries the Hamerstroms, called these mentored colleagues and friends "*gaboons*." Jack meant that term with the utmost respect because he understood the dangers, the blood, sweat, and tears, and the skill necessary to put bands on birds. As a sign of great affection, his peers referred to him as the "*Grand Gaboon*." His influence and passion for raptors was infectious; many of those who assisted him have become successful and influential banders and mentors to fellow bio-climber researchers, naturalists, falconers, educators, and RRF members.

JP and PD were mentored by Jack for many field seasons in the complex art of arboreal nest entries. To them and others, Jack was one of the most delightful, laid back, funniest people they have worked with in the field, as well as one of the most skilled bio-climbers they and RRF has ever seen. Such skill is also exacting, and as JP recalls from early in his training, Jack showed him the Blake's hitch rappelling knot once, and only once.

Jack spent decades dedicated to raptors—banding nestlings, trapping at migration stations, putting up Great Horned Owl nest-platforms ("cans"), and performing other arboreal fieldwork. While accomplishing this often dangerous work, Jack lived hand-to-mouth and drove thousands of miles in his Volkswagen van, which was often his field home. He could also be loudly emphatic with concerns about sudden injury to himself and the nestlings while climbing difficult trees; JP remembers Jack finding a toy rat in an eagle nest and recalls it was great to hear him laughing instead of the more-typical cussing when the climb was not going exactly as planned. Jack also had some "rituals" that his colleagues always enjoyed. Breakfast? Hamburger, period. Or maybe a leftover Chinese chicken salad. End-of-the-day libation was often a glass of red, white, or rosé wine, and then maybe some beer chasers—all carefully lined up. And of course, those who spent weeks with him during banding season remember his evening "crunchies" of celery, carrots, etc., as he wrote up data during friendly banter.

Jack was one-of-a-kind and, throughout his life, was solely dedicated to and focused on raptors. The authors of this memoriam doubt anyone will ever come close to matching what he did on behalf of raptors in the field. He instilled in all he encountered a love for raptors because he clearly loved all birds of prey. Jack's devotion played an important role in the recovery of the Bald Eagle, and fueled the work of a generation of conservationists working today on projects that require understanding complex natural history, and banding adult and nestling raptors. Jack had no surviving relatives, but fostered legions of friends and acquaintances who will long remember his skill, expertise, and knowledge of what seems in the days of modern modeling to be a lost art—difficult fieldwork and sketchy nest entries.—**Gary Denzler (retired), Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, Cincinnati, OH 45220 USA; Robert Thobaben, Wilmington, OH 45177 USA; Jeffrey L. Hays, RAPTOR, Inc., Milford, OH 45150 USA; Joseph Papp, Drummond, WI 54832 USA; and Pete DeSimone, Audubon Starr Ranch Sanctuary, Trabuco Canyon, CA 92679 USA**

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Videos of Jack Holt banding eagles in the 1960s and 1970s with his longtime friend and colleague Sergej Postupalsky are available at https://youtu.be/7Tk_NaZXgdI and <https://youtu.be/UKPunkj-nV8>. PD.

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