

## **In Memoriam: Jon Charles Barlow, 1935–2009**

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## *In Memoriam*

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### IN MEMORIAM: JON CHARLES BARLOW, 1935–2009

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Jon Charles Barlow, 1935–2009  
(At Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado, in June 1999. Photograph by Amy Barlow.)

Jon Charles Barlow, Fellow and former council member of the AOU, died on 9 February 2009, at the age of 73, from complications of Alzheimer's disease. Jon was born on 31 October 1935 in Jacksonville, Illinois. He received a B.A. (cum laude) in Biology and Chemistry from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, followed by an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Kansas under Richard F. Johnston. His Master's thesis was on the natural history of Bell's Vireo, and his Ph.D. dissertation was titled *Ecology and Zoogeography of Uruguayan Mammals*. In July 1965, Jon became curator in the Department of Ornithology at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, and soon he was cross-appointed to the Department of Zoology, University of Toronto (UT). He held these positions for 35 years. He was curator

and head of the Department of Ornithology at the ROM from 1965 to 1976, and he was founder and chair of the ROM Research Colloquium. Although his Ph.D. dissertation was on Uruguayan mammals and he retained a lifelong interest in mammals, among ornithologists Jon is best remembered for his extensive studies of vireos, especially their vocalizations and behavior. For this research, Jon and his students traveled extensively throughout Canada, the United States (especially west Texas), and the Caribbean. Although his first published paper presented observations of courtship feeding in the Lark Sparrow, most of his work was on vireos. He frequently spoke at ornithological meetings, usually on vireos, and was generally recognized as the world's foremost authority on vireo biology.

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Jon was always active in the major American ornithological societies. In addition to being a Fellow of the AOU, he was editor of the *Wilson Bulletin* from 1979 through 1984 and served on the council of the Wilson Ornithological Society and as its second vice president (1985 and 1986), first vice president (1987 and 1988), and president (1989 and 1990). He was a member of the Executive Board of the Cooper Ornithological Society (1981–1983), editor of the Life Science Series at the ROM (1973–1978), and vice chairman of the Board of Scientists of the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute (1981–1984). He chaired the Toronto Zoo's Animal Care Committee and was an active member of the Board of the Toronto Zoo from 1990 to 2001. He led the Museum Studies Program, through the ROM and UT, and in this capacity inspired many graduate students to pursue careers in museum work. In recognition of his efforts in the ROM Department of Ornithology and Museum Studies, Jon was recently awarded the prestigious Bruce Naylor Award from the Alliance of Natural History Museums of Canada.

Jon taught systematic ornithology in the Department of Zoology at UT from 1965 until his retirement, and he supervised the research of 16 graduate students. Jon took students' requests for letters of recommendation more seriously than most, often spending up to several days crafting each letter, usually with salutary results. His conscientious care was greatly appreciated by those who benefited from these letters. When Jon arrived in Toronto in 1965, he became the first professional ornithologist in Canada to supervise graduate students in ornithology. Before the mid-1960s, Canada's universities had limited graduate programs. Talented undergraduates generally went elsewhere for their graduate training. English-speaking students commonly went to Oxford or Cornell University, and many of these students returned to Canada to fill various positions in research and teaching. In the 1960s, there was a major push in Canada, especially in Ontario, to expand the academic horizons of Canadian universities, and many new, highly trained professors and curators were hired, Jon being among the first of these.

When Jon took over as curator of ornithology at the ROM, the bird collection was extensive and international but contained mostly conventional study skins and eggs, many with minimal data and thus of limited scientific value. Jon immediately encouraged the expansion of skeletal specimens and specimens in spirits for anatomical studies. He also encouraged new, innovative

methods of preparing specimens, such as preparing specimens as skins and skeletons (only a few of the bones were left in the skin so that a skin that showed most of the feathers and a nearly complete skeleton was saved on each). He also started a library of bird songs (especially vireo songs) and encouraged the collection of tissue samples for systematic, evolutionary, and behavioral studies. In his career, Jon excelled as a curator, mentor, editor, educator, administrator, and researcher—all the talents one expects a museum curator and academic to possess.

Jon's interests outside of biology were many and varied. He was a rabid fan of University of Kansas basketball and, in baseball, of the Detroit Tigers and the Toronto Blue Jays. His memory was encyclopedic, especially in citing facts and papers about birds, but nowhere was his power of recall more evident than in quoting baseball statistics, which illuminated both his love of the game and his understanding of it. His interests in music ranged widely. He had an enormous collection of records, especially of rhythm and blues, western, and rock and roll. When traveling, Jon seized every opportunity to visit used record shops, where he could pick up out-of-print records that struck his fancy and curiosity. A movie buff, he especially liked classics and westerns and insisted that his children watch *The Wizard of Oz* once a year. Although none of his children has gone into biology, at least as of this date, his oldest daughter has become a professor of film studies.

Jon had a rich and original sense of humor. He did not tell jokes, but he was quick to see the humor in quotidian events and had a nickname for everyone with whom he associated. Many of these are best not repeated except in limited company. I presume that our doctoral supervisor, Richard Johnston, would not mind if I publicly divulged his name, an appropriately avian one, "Dickey J," or sometimes *Cyanocorax dickeyi*, which was always applied with respect and affection. Jon referred to himself as "Jonny Cool," or various versions thereof, depending on context.

Jon's encyclopedic knowledge of birds, baseball, and music will be greatly missed, as will his quick wit. It is a cruel irony that Alzheimer's deprived him of an outlet for these diverse talents.

He is survived by his five children, Melinda, Timothy, Amy, Ella, and Deron, whom he adored; by his wife, Margaret May; by his ex-wife, Judy; and by his brother Tom and his family.

I appreciate comments from Nancy "Nancita" Flood, Janet "Wingy" Mannone, Bruce "Brewster" McGillivray, and Trudy "Trudenzia" Rising.