

Robert W. Dickerman, 1926–2015

Author: Johnson, Andrew

Source: The Auk, 133(2) : 322-323

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1642/AUK-15-207.1>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.



IN MEMORIAM

Robert W. Dickerman, 1926–2015

Andrew Johnson

Division of Birds, Museum of Southwestern Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA
ajohnson@unm.edu

Published March 30, 2016

Bob Dickerman died peacefully in his Bernalillo, New Mexico, home after a month of valiant struggle to overcome complications of a stroke. The trajectory of his career can be tracked through his varied peer-reviewed publications and the specimens upon which many of those publications were based. Perusal of the specimen labels and the titles of the publications reveals that he was widely traveled, and although the majority of his publications were about bird distribution and taxonomy, he also was an accomplished mammalogist, dabbled in animal behavior, and coauthored important virology publications (see *Western Birds* 43:200–202). Bob was an AOU Fellow since 1983 and an Elective Member of AOU since 1973.

We will miss Bob's warmth, friendship, and sense of humor. However, long after the last Dickerman story is told by those who knew him, Bob's legacy will remain, in a vibrant Division of Birds at the Museum of Southwestern Biology (MSB) and in the treasure trove of specimens with "RWD" on the label that he deposited at institutions across the country and around the world.

Bob was the middle child of three boys who grew up on a farm in upstate New York during the Great Depression. He was drafted for World War II but was too young to see combat. He served in Tokyo during the occupation of Japan after the war and attended Cornell University on the GI Bill after his discharge. Although an undergraduate, he was as old as the graduate students and shared office space with them, which afforded him opportunities to gain experience as a field biologist that younger undergraduate students might not have had. He once told me during one of our field trips within New Mexico that his interest in specimen-based science was piqued at Cornell when a Red Phalarope wandered to Cayuga Lake in September 1947. He witnessed the collection and preparation of this specimen (CUMV 21260) and was hooked. Bob soon learned to prepare museum specimens, and he put those skills to use as a field collector and preparator at the University of Kansas in the 1950s, and then as a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota.

During his years at Kansas and Minnesota, Bob spent his field time primarily in Mexico. His Ph.D. advisor, Dwain Warner, said that nobody knew Mexico better than Bob (*Moments of Discovery*, University of Florida Press, 2010, ed. K. Winker). It would surprise many people to learn that Bob spent his professional career employed as a virologist at the Cornell Medical School in New York City. However, he never forgot his roots, and he also held an appointment in the Bird Department at the American Museum of Natural History. Besides teaching classes in virology, he was the field coordinator for a project that screened wild



Bob Dickerman at a bird skinning demonstration at the Rio Grande Nature Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico, May 2004. Photographer unknown

populations of vertebrates for encephalitis viruses, a job for which he was preadapted given his background in field collecting. Under his watch, these specimens didn't get discarded or released, as so often happens in similar field efforts when hosts are screened for disease. Instead, he saved them, prepared them, and deposited them in museum collections.

Bob retired from Cornell in the late 1980s and moved to the Southwest. Tucson had grown too big, and he never aspired to be among the golfing senior community that he perceived Tucson to be. Bob wanted a respite from the cold New York winters and a chance to continue to contribute to ornithology and museum collections. He was welcomed to the University of New Mexico as a Research Associate Professor and assumed the role of Acting Curator of the Bird Division at the MSB, a position he held until January 2007. During that time, the Bird Collection benefited from his undivided attention and grew exponentially—from 6,000 specimens in 1989 to 26,000 in late 2007. Upon his arrival, Bob forged lasting relationships with personnel in the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the wildlife rehabilitation community in New Mexico.

Bob accomplished this unprecedented collection growth via much hard work. His lasting impression on most who met him during his tenure at the MSB was that he was constantly beaver away as he prepared, catalogued, and collected specimens and published scientific papers on them. Bob was among the hardest workers I have ever known: When I arrived in New Mexico in 2003, he was in the museum most days—even weekends—preparing specimens, then working on manuscripts in the afternoons and evenings. He also managed to have an inordinate amount of fun in the process, and the parties he hosted at his house are legendary.

A judicious collector of specimens, he built the MSB Bird Collection through several avenues. He salvaged specimens aggressively, coordinating rehabilitators to send their mortalities to the MSB. He then selected the important specimens and discarded the rest, or sent them to other institutions that wanted regional representation from the Southwest. To him, there was little room in the MSB collection for material that was not useful for taxonomic studies of geographically variable species in the Southwest. Many meadowlarks, Song Sparrows, and Red-winged Blackbirds gained eternal life in a museum drawer at his hands. He also made trades for and received donations of prepared specimens. Major collections received by MSB as donations during his tenure were the Amadeo Rea Collection, the U.S. Geological Survey Collection, and the Dale Zimmerman Collection of Birds

of the World. He made an effort, with the help of John Hubbard, to repatriate historical specimens collected in New Mexico but housed in other museums by trading for them. Thus, the MSB has historical specimens collected by T. C. Henry, Frank Stephens (including New Mexico's first Aplomado Falcon), Charles Marsh, and many first and second state specimens. His philanthropic activities were significant in facilitating this growth, and he made donations generously to support several museum collections and other social causes as he saw fit.

For the amount of time Bob devoted to his work in the collection, he didn't neglect his other interests. He was an artist and especially enjoyed sculpting the human torso in clay; he also painted oils on canvas, the subject matter often landscapes and wildlife or the human figure. His home was his castle, and it was decorated with a lifetime of personal treasures from around the world. Everything from beachcombing prizes and discarded laboratory glassware to African dolls and Balinese masks lined his shelves and hung on his walls. Despite the quantity, these treasures were displayed tastefully, and one could hardly consider his house cluttered.

He was an excellent chef with a repertoire of good hearty fare. As a boy he had broken his leg and couldn't work on the farm, so his mother took over his work and he did the cooking until his leg healed. I'll always remember my first months in New Mexico as his houseguest. I'd arrive home to the smell of pork chops, spaghetti, or pescado a la Veracruzana simmering in the pan as Bob tended the evening's creation, a glass of bourbon in his hand. Spicy foods were a favorite of his, as were potatoes. "When you're out of potatoes, you're out of food," was one of my favorites of his quips.

It's hard to describe the personality of the man who accomplished all of this. He was a loving, compassionate, and positive person. The University of Alaska Museum bird collection staff described him to me before I met him as a classically trained museum ornithologist with boundless energy and a heart of gold. Age eventually dampened his energy levels, but his heart was only enriched. More than one person told me they would always remember Bob as the man who made an effort to come and talk to them as a scared new graduate student at his or her first meeting. He trained countless students in specimen preparation and field collecting. I'll remember him most for his warmth and generosity. He was a caring, gentle soul and saw the beauty and humor in life. He could find the good in everybody and was everyone's friend if they gave him a chance, for he gave everyone he met that chance.

Memorials Editor: Ted Anderson, ted020@centurytel.net