

## IN MEMORIAM: RALPH W. SCHREIBER, 1942-1988

GLEN E. WOOLFENDEN

*Department of Biology, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida 33620 USA*



RALPH W. SCHREIBER, 1942-1988

Ralph Schreiber, the pelican man, a Fellow and a Patron of the American Ornithologists' Union, died on 29 March 1988, at the age of 45, of pancreatic and liver cancer. The malady was not detected until February; in mid-January a group of us still had plans to go to Midway Island with Ralph to band albatrosses. His family and many friends mourn his untimely death. Seabirds the world over have lost a devoted and indefatigable spokesman.

Ralph Walter Schreiber was born 6 July 1942

in Wooster, Ohio. He received a B.A. degree in 1964 from the College of Wooster, where his father (then head of the German department) taught, and where Ralph at 6'4" was a stalwart on the varsity basketball team. Ralph received an M.S. degree in 1966 from the University of Maine, Orono, and a Ph.D. in 1974 from the University of South Florida, Tampa. There I had the pleasure of serving as his dissertation advisor.

Ralph's professional career began shortly af-

ter he received his Master's degree. From 1966 to 1969 he was a Research Biologist for The Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Program of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., for which he designed and conducted studies of the breeding biology of seabirds and marine mammals in the central Pacific Ocean. Fieldwork included numerous long stints on desolate islands, where Ralph developed the fascination with colonial seabirds that would govern the rest of his life.

From 1969 to 1976 Ralph lived in Tampa, Florida. It is this period that I know best, for during these years we worked on many projects together. Based on these experiences, it is easy for me to characterize Ralph's approach to life. He got jobs done, and he had great fun doing them, especially when they involved teamwork with good friends. His oft-heard moans and expletives were more for show than expressions of any trouble within. His frequent, deep, resonant, staccato laugh revealed a peaceful inner self, happiest when hard at work or relaxing after the work was done.

Literally hundreds of people, both biologists and laypersons, accepted Ralph's, and later both Ralph's and Betty Anne's, invitations to join them in their fieldwork. Especially memorable for many of us was banding young pelicans—in summer, in Florida, in mangrove swamps, with warm fish parts raining down “from both ends” of the hordes of what Ralph considered to be “real birds” (i.e. “over 1 kg in weight”). Despite these working conditions, most of his conscripts asked for more. Why? Because Ralph was convincing when explaining the importance of the work, and because he made it fun. Many of those who joined the parties have since become biologists and staunch conservationists. One of the early converts was Elizabeth Anne Ferguson of Tampa. Ralph and Betty Anne were married in 1972, a short time after they met. In their years together as husband and wife they were best friends, close professional colleagues, and often foils to one another's feigned cynicism. I have rarely seen a more intimate pair bond and never a better team.

While in Florida Ralph co-founded Biological Research Associates, Inc., an environmental consulting firm. Those who knew Ralph well know that the acronym was no accident. BRA thrives today and enjoys an excellent reputation among biologists. Ralph and Betty Anne co-founded Seabird Research, Inc. a nonprofit re-

search and educational organization, which concentrates on the conservation of water birds in Florida. Ralph, the entrepreneur for pelicans, also appeared on the popular television show “What's My Line?” The panelists did not guess Ralph's profession.

Ralph was a charter member of the Florida Ornithological Society, and served the fledgling organization in many ways including as Vice President from 1975 to 1977. At the same time he was a member of the Board of Directors of the Florida Audubon Society. While in Florida Ralph also became an invited member of the U. S. Department of the Interior Recovery Team for the Eastern Brown Pelican and the Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals.

In 1976 Ralph moved to California to take the position of Curator of Ornithology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. In 1984 he became Head of the Section of Birds and Mammals, a position he held until his death. At the museum Ralph's professional activities blossomed. I will list only a few. He was active in several capacities in the International Council for Bird Preservation, including Chairman of the Seabird Specialist Group (1984–1987), in the Pacific Seabird Group, and Hubbs Seaworld Research Institute. He was an Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Southern California. He held several positions in the Cooper Ornithological Society including President from 1983 to 1985. He served on the Advisory Panel on the Status of the California Condor for the American Ornithologists' Union and the National Audubon Society. Ralph worked for the A.O.U. in several other capacities. He served as an Elective Member of the Council (1979–1982), as an Endowment Trustee, and on the Investment Committee. As Chairman of the Scientific Program for the Annual Meetings in 1978 and 1981, he was the first to juxtapose concurrent presentations on the printed program and to make sure that they, in fact, were concurrently presented. At meetings Ralph exhibited his flair for the innovative. He instituted “The Worst Slide Award” to emphasize the need to improve visual aids. Ralph's “loud” pants became a familiar, joyful attraction at A.O.U. banquets. Superficially irascible, cynical, and opinionated, within Ralph was mild, eager to learn, and a devoted friend.

Ralph conducted research on central Pacific islands for more than two decades. He was on

Anacapa Island in the late 1960s as part of the Smithsonian team that made the original discovery that DDT was affecting the Brown Pelicans. Thereafter he was active in the fight to ban DDT. In 1982–1983 Ralph and Betty Anne received worldwide attention and considerable public exposure for documenting the devastating effect on seabird breeding brought on by an exceptionally strong El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO). On Christmas Island, Pacific Ocean, they witnessed many millions of seabirds abandon nesting virtually simultaneously. The birds had detected the coming of ENSO before scientists. These observations supported Ralph's long-held view that seabird populations are largely regulated by stochastic catastrophic events rather than competition over food or nest sites. Ralph's research was supported by numerous organizations and many private individuals, including the National Science Foundation and the National Geographic Society.

Ralph was author and editor of over 100 publications, many co-authored, especially with his wife Betty Anne. His dissertation on Brown Pelican behavior was published as an *Ornithological Monograph*. A few papers were on mammals; the rest were on birds, most of these in ornithological journals. An excellent photographer, many of his pictures were published in *National Geographic*, *American Birds*, and other widely circulated magazines. Often, and without prior notice, Ralph would send a friend one of his photographs, already mounted, ready for hanging.

Ralph, a Member of the A.O.U. since 1957, became an Elective Member in 1976, a Patron in 1979, and a Fellow in 1981. Among several other honors, in 1981 he received the Meritorious Conservation Award from The International Wildlife Foundation for promoting the knowledge, study, and conservation of Pacific seabirds.

In recent years much of Ralph's and Betty Anne's time and effort at the museum were directed toward the construction of a new exhibit hall, which will incorporate a vast range of innovative interactive educational exhibits to popularize bird ecology and conservation. Most of the funds needed to build the hall have been raised and most of the plans completed, and it is a pleasure to report that Betty Anne will be staying on at the museum to see this great project through to completion. Ralph never strayed from basic seabird research, however. He and Betty Anne were actively working on many projects, including monitoring survival and long-term breeding trends in the albatrosses of Midway Island.

On 16 May 1988 at the Natural History Museum, Craig Black, Director, Betty Anne and the Schreiber family (parents William I. and Clare Adel, and brothers William M., James L., and Stephen T.) hosted a "Celebration of the Life of Ralph W. Schreiber." Dr. Black announced that the new bird exhibit would be named the Ralph W. Schreiber Hall of Birds. Drinks and hors d'oeuvres were served beneath candid slides of Ralph in the field, often in exotic places, and virtually always with Betty Anne by his side. A three-piece ensemble played the classical music he loved. Scores of friends from numerous professions assembled from near and far. In the group were many who had shared good times and hard work with Ralph Schreiber. They spoke of these, and of the man, with a common theme. Ralph loved people, and loved life, perhaps even more than he loved seabirds. With Betty Anne's help, he had lived his years to the fullest and had left us all the poorer that he was not granted twice as many.

(Memorial prepared with the assistance of mutual good friend John Fitzpatrick.)