



Bob Powell examining an anole with a student in his lab at Avila University.

## P R O F I L E

# Successfully Wearing Two Hats: A Profile of Robert Powell

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Over the past 30+ years, I have had the good fortune of three prolonged and prolific collaborations. The first was with Dr. Henry Fitch. It began in the early 1970s, continued into the late 1980s, and was briefly resurrected in the pages of this journal in 2003. I began my collaboration with Dr. Albert Schwartz in 1982, and it continued until his untimely death in 1992. The third collaboration, with Dr. Bob Powell, began in 1992 and, 14 years and 45 publications later, we're still at it. Over the course of this professional relationship, I have come to consider Bob a good friend and someone whom I admire tremendously.

Born in Germany, but raised in Missouri (and eventually earning his Ph.D. at the University of Missouri), Bob has had an amazingly productive career as an educator and researcher. He is Professor of Biology at Avila University in Kansas City,

Missouri. As a small, private school, the emphasis is on teaching and not research. Despite a full teaching load, Bob has nevertheless found time to write books, edit journals, and produce hundreds of research papers, often co-authored with undergraduate students.

Employed as he is with a heavy teaching load and many contact hours with students, it would have been easy for Bob to relegate research to "hobby" status; i.e., publish an occasional note here and there, based on some fortuitous observation made on a class field trip. His passion for, and dedication to, herpetology has prevented that from happening — and how has Bob accomplished this? By involving undergrads with a serious interest in biology in general, and perhaps amphibians and reptiles in particular. In 1991, Bob applied successfully to the



JOHN S. PARMERLEE, JR.

Photograph taken during the late 1970s before an attempt by Bob, friends, and students to excavate an underground passage in an Ozark Cave. The "after" picture (apparently lost) showed less humanity and considerably more mud. Bob is on the left and John Parmerlee is second from the right (according to John, their positions in the photo correspond rather accurately to their political leanings).



PHOTO CREDIT: UNKNOWN

Meeting the local herpetofauna (*Geochelone* sp.) on a trip to Belém, Brazil in the late 1980s.



ROBERT W. HENDERSON

Bob with a Puerto Rican Racer (*Alsophis portoricensis*) on Guana Island in the British Virgin Islands in 2003.



JOHN S. PARMERLEE, JR.

Bob in a “supervisory” posture with students on Grenada in 2002.



JOHN S. PARMERLEE, JR.

Carrying dishes to the creek during the 1970s on an early trip with students to Mexico; Bob uses this photo to imply that “everyone” has to help in the field, even with tasks that are less than fun.

National Science Foundation for a Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) grant. He and John Parmerlee then recruited undergraduate students from throughout the U.S. to participate in a 10-week summer program that would introduce them to conducting original field research with reptiles and amphibians in an “exotic” locale. Since the initial REU year, Bob has led seven REU trips to the Dominican Republic, Anguilla, Grenada, and St. Eustatius, and helped with another, organized by Alicia Mathis and Bob Wilkinson at Southwest Missouri

State University (now Missouri State University), to Mexico. Another trip, this one to St. Vincent, is slated for 2006.

Prior to going in the field, the students gather at Avila, where Bob and John make sure that they familiarize themselves with the literature dealing with the frogs and reptiles they will encounter (and with which they will ultimately attain a high level of intimacy). They also learn something about the country they are going to visit, including local customs, health issues, conservation concerns, etc. Possible research projects are discussed, including methods that may be employed, equipment required, germane statistical procedures, and so on. When they get to the study locale, they hit the ground running. They have three weeks to find a study site, finalize methods, and collect data. Each student works on more than one project, making for three weeks of intensive biology. As an instructor on three REU trips, I know that it's not unusual to be going from before sun-up to well into the night. After the fieldwork, the students return to Avila to analyze the data and write their research papers. This is accomplished under the guidance of Bob and John. They work with students on their statistical analyses and technical writing, wanting each student to ultimately have one or more publications as a result of the REU experience. Having those publications will look good when they apply to graduate schools, and Bob is adamant about students completing projects they've started (even if completion occurs a year or two after their REU experience). Powell knows this is in the students' best interest, and it reflects his three-pronged teaching philosophy: 1) provide students with the opportunity to acquire, practice, and receive reinforcement of fundamental knowledge and skills; 2) encourage students to think, question, analyze, and test; 3) design

courses that provide students with both realistic challenges and opportunities for success. I have observed Bob apply this philosophy over and over with REU students, and I'm sure he employs it in the classrooms at Avila as well. He makes sure he knows what each REU student is doing every day and monitors the progress of each project.

Over the course of about 50 trips to the West Indies, Bob has, either in collaboration with professional colleagues or with REU students, studied various aspects of the ecology and behavior of a broad taxonomic array of frogs and reptiles. He produced a herpetological guide to Navassa Island, examined niche partitioning in several species of anoles, geckos, ameivas, and curlytails, and has made observations on several iguanids (*Cyclura*, *Ctenosaura*, and *Iguana*).

When it comes to fieldwork, Bob is tireless and, considering how out of shape he is, that's pretty remarkable. He will sprint after lizards and snakes, huffing and puffing but almost always successful in his pursuit of some very surprised critters. He will rise early in the morning and scout for similarly early-rising lizards, and he will work late into the night, collecting data on *Anolis* sleep-sites or gecko activity. Powell's research focuses heavily on lizards, and he is particularly (unnaturally?) fond of anoles and iguanas. He has cited more than once a comment I made initially in a letter of recommendation supporting an application for a sabbatical at Avila. In effect, I noted that we complement each other very nicely because he studies lizards and I concentrate on the snakes that eat them. Over the years, I have learned a great deal about lizards from Bob, and I think he



JOHN S. PAMERLEE, JR.

Bob climbing the "Castillo" at Chichen Itzá on the Yucatán Peninsula in 1980.



SARAH WISSMANN

Bob on a WinAir flight to St. Eustatius in 2004.



JAMES D. FORRESTER

Exploring the extent of a recent clear-cut in a high-elevation cloudforest in the Dominican Republic in 1993.

knows a little bit more about snakes than he did before we started to collaborate — and, at times, I believe that a little knowledge can be dangerous; on a couple of recent trips, he caught more snakes than I did, something he never lets me forget.

In addition to fieldwork, Powell has volunteered his time to editing several herpetological publications. Between 1991 and 2004, Bob was editor of the *Catalogue of American Amphibians and Reptiles*, published by the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles. This often tedious and time-consuming responsibility produced detailed, loose-leaf accounts of at least 20 species every year. While still editing the *Catalogue*, Bob assumed the duties of editing this journal (*IGUANA*). Besides the editing, Bob solicited articles from a wide spectrum of potential contributors (zoo personnel, museum curators, his REU students, of course, and even his son), sought interesting illustrations, and wrote many articles himself. He has made a substantial contribution toward the transformation of *IGUANA* from a thin newsletter into a robust, attractive, and informative journal. The scope of the journal has expanded recently, but it

has never lost sight of its original purpose of bridging gaps between hobbyists and “professionals” by emphasizing common interests in conservation, natural history, and husbandry. He also has co-authored two books and co-edited two others concerned with West Indian herpetology and, straying from the Antilles, he co-authored a book with identification keys to the amphibians and reptiles of the United States.

In short, I find much to admire about Bob, and to single out one attribute is perhaps doing him a disservice. Nevertheless, I shall. I never cease to be impressed by Bob’s dedication to his students and to teaching. Although I only see him as a teacher in the context of the REU program, he never stops doing what he believes is in the best interest of the students. He gets down and dirty in the field, makes himself available at all hours, and will drive across an island at any hour of the day or night in order to get that last bit of data that might make all the difference in the quality of a student’s project. He does his homework regarding various statistical procedures necessary to adequately analyze the data collected in the field. He does not hesitate to contact colleagues that he feels can contribute to the analysis or that might be a good collaborator or mentor for a student with an especially strong interest in a particular topic. I have difficulty imagining someone more dedicated to his students and to his research discipline. A less focused person would quickly choose to do one or the other well (that is, to wear one hat). Bob Powell has devoted himself to both and has demonstrated excellence as a concerned educator and a dedicated scientist.

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JOHN S. PARMERLEE, JR.

Helping measure and mark a sampling site on St. Eustatius in 2004.