



JOHN OLTROFF

Kraig in a section of his massive library, where he can often be found working.

## P R O F I L E

# Kraig Adler: A Lifetime Promoting Herpetology

Michael L. Treglia

Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, TX 77843-2258

The Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (SSAR) has been an important herpetological institution for more than half a century. Kraig Adler has been involved from the beginning and has helped make the Society what it is today. He has been an enormous influence in modern herpetology, as one of the founders of the SSAR, as a major contributor to our knowledge of amphibians and reptiles, and as a source of inspiration for future herpetologists.

Kraig was born in Lima, Ohio, and moved to Columbus when he was nine. Columbus is where his interest in herps blossomed, and where, only three years later, he met Dave Dennis while herping at the O'Shaughnessy Dam on the Scioto River. Upon meeting, each had a bag full of snakes, Kraig with Northern Watersnakes found under rocks, and Dave with Queen Snakes found on tree branches — an early lesson in microhabitat selection. The two used Roger Conant's *Reptiles of Ohio* as their "bible," reading and re-reading it, marking the



JACQUELINE GRANT

Kraig showing off his billiard skills while socializing at the 1998 joint meeting of the SSAR, Herpetologists League, and the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists. To the left is Dr. John Moriarty, University of Minnesota (and editor of the SSAR Herpetological Circulars program) and to the right is Dr. Michael Bernard as an undergraduate, now an Assistant Professor at Case Western University. Mike is one of many of Kraig's students to continue with a successful career in biology.



DAVE DENNIS

Kraig (in the foreground) and Dave Dennis working with Barry Valentine at Ohio State University.

maps with their own records, in a quest to fill the large gaps that existed in distributional information. In their undergraduate years (Dave at Ohio State University and Kraig at Ohio Wesleyan University), they met Dr. Barry Valentine at OSU, who opened his lab to the two, guiding them down the road to real science.

During those early years, Kraig and Dave met Ray Ashton, Joseph T. Collins, Corson Hirschfeld, from the Cincinnati area, and somewhat later, Jim Murphy. As the "Columbus boys," Kraig and Dave were "refined gentlemen" according to Jim Murphy, whereas the "Cincy boys," as Kraig would call them, were "always suspect in polite society." In 1957, Kraig, at 16 years old and Dave at 17, officially formed The Ohio Herpetological Society (OHS), with Kraig as the president. He was already a walking encyclopedia of herpetology, had already started building his massive library (now among the largest private herpetological libraries in the world), and was always out herping.

The entire group formed a sort of herpetological Dead Poets Society, and comprised a major component of the OHS. Whoever was in Columbus would attend "stapling parties" in Dave's basement, where they would print the OHS journals,



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On the most recent trip to observe Hellbenders, Kraig (bottom right) with Cornell undergraduate and graduate students, led by Ken Roblee, New York State DEC Biologist, near Olean, New York.

and set the pages around the room. Practically every horizontal surface in the room had pages on it, and everyone went around collating and stapling the pages. Every stapling party would be accompanied by Dave's guitar-playing and singing, and closed with a bottle of Madeira wine, which could not be uncorked until they were finished.

In 1967 the OHS became the SSAR (to represent its rapid growth into an international organization), and throughout his career, Kraig has remained an important figure, filling various roles in the Society. For example, in 1979 he started the book series, "Contributions to Herpetology", in which 22 volumes have been published, with more to come. Kraig was also elected the Secretary-General of the first World Congress of Herpetology, which was held in 1989 in Canterbury, U.K. This was the first major international meeting of herpetologists, and the largest gathering of herpetologists held to date (1,600 persons).

Kraig also has had a very productive academic career, spending most of it at Cornell University. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan in 1968, and spent four years in a faculty position at Notre Dame before moving to Cornell in 1972. He has written over 150 technical articles and nine books, among them the popular *Encyclopedia of Reptiles and Amphibians*, co-authored with Tim Halliday, and the renowned *Herpetology of China*, with Ermi Zhao. In his publications, Kraig was the first to describe important principles of amphibian behavior such as magnetic, extraocular, and polarized light perception for navigation, as well as kin recognition in tadpoles. He has also published extensively on zooarchaeology, particularly with regard to turtles, as well as on amphibian systematics, describing a dozen new species of frogs and salamanders, mostly from northern Mexico. As a faculty member in the Department



BETSY DARLINGTON

A group of students from the Cornell Herpetological Society enjoying a lunchtime chat with Kraig during a field trip to the Parker Nature Preserve of the Finger Lakes Land Trust.

of Neurobiology and Behavior at Cornell, he has served as department chair (currently for the third time), and, during 1998–2000, was Cornell's Vice-Provost of Life Sciences, where he oversaw 500 professors and was responsible for hiring 60 new faculty members. In this position, Kraig also was instrumental in funding and breaking ground for the construction of \$300 million of new research facilities on campus.

Many of Kraig's activities illustrate his commitment to the future of herpetology, particularly through the recruitment of new members to the discipline. Even while in college, he taught summer herpetology courses at Culver Military Academy in

Indiana, from which he graduated in 1957. One story many of his students have heard him tell refers to a favored field site, Lake Maxinkuckee. Juvenile turtles would bask on a mat of aquatic vegetation and get stuck while trying to retreat to the water. The group would sit watching turtles from just over a small hill, and students would take turns picking one to catch. Every student, no matter how out of shape, could reliably experience the joy and excitement of catching one. Continuing in that vein, since 1993, almost from its inception, Kraig has served as faculty advisor to the undergraduate-founded Cornell Herpetological Society (CHS). This is where I and many others first met him. Although the CHS is entirely student-run, Kraig provides valuable assistance, using his professional network to help arrange trips to zoos and universities, bring in guest lecturers, and generally enhance the experience of participating students. He attends virtually every event, and gets to know the students, often serving as an informal, if not a formal academic advisor. He facilitates students' involvement in herpetology collectively and individually, in part by helping them develop a network of contacts through participation in professional meetings and research internships.

One of the favorite annual CHS events is a trip to western New York to see Hellbenders. These trips have been unique opportunities to observe these awesome amphibians, and they also provided occasions for students to interact with herpetologists like Ken Roblee of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the late Dr. Richard Bothner from St. Bonaventure University.

Kraig always strives to achieve the highest quality in all that he does. Although we all make mistakes, finding as much as a typo in any of his work is rare. He tends to expect the same quality of work from everyone else, and many of us are undoubtedly better for it.

Kraig's close colleagues sometimes regard him as an atypical herpetologist. At a meeting, some of them realized he was the



JAN SHELLEY

Kraig with a Hellbender in hand in 2006. As always, when in the field, he is a representative of Cornell University, to which his "Big Red" hat clearly testifies.



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The Cornell Herpetological Society on their most recent fall trip to the reptile house of the Philadelphia Zoo. On the same trip, they also visited with Drs. Aaron Bauer and Todd Jackman at Villanova University. As per usual on these trips, Kraig is wearing his red Cornell hat. Other faculty members often participate in CHS events, evident here in the form of Professor emeritus of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Howie Evans (on Kraig's left) and Howie's wife, Erica (far left).

only one who was "married once, did not have long hair or facial hair, never cussed (well almost never), and was never into rock-and-roll or anything fun — only herps and herp books." However, Kraig does have a sense of humor, albeit herp-based, seen in his secret weakness for inaccurate (and sometimes ridiculous) herpetologically oriented movies (e.g., *Anaconda* and *Anaconda 2: Search for the Blood Orchid*), an obsession few ever see. Kraig's humor also is evident in a story he often tells about a trip to Mexico with Dave Dennis while he was at Notre Dame. While at dinner, upon seeing a gecko on the ceiling, Kraig instinctively stunned it with a rubber band, knocking it onto another occupied table. These rubber-banding skills have gone a long way, from disturbing the patrons at this restaurant, to impressing people in various parts of the world (including China and Mexican police at a traffic stop), and, of course, they have contributed immensely to the collection of museum specimens.

Kraig is an amazing biologist, teacher, mentor, and person. Herpetology is lucky to have him, and the field certainly would not be the same without him.