



OBITUARY

 Joseph T. Collins 1939–2012¹

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I arrived at the University of Kansas Natural History Museum in January 1970, by chance renting an apartment down the block from Joe (who at the time went by Tom). We had much in common, with interests in North American herpetology, mine restricted to snakes and his more broad.

As our interactions and friendship grew, I remarked on the paucity of public education efforts at the Museum; only one person at that time did their best to do some school programs. This immediately clicked with Joe and was to become his principal niche—presenting his favorite animals to the general public. He was a superb wordsmith, meticulous, and with excellent organizational skills, qualities that allowed him to interpret the natural world in a manner to which the lay public readily responded.

As we began to collaborate on public education exhibits of live vertebrates and invertebrates displayed on the Museum's 6th floor, to host school groups in the Museum, and take youngsters on field trips, Joe's vision gelled. The arrival (also from Ohio) of Ray Ashton at the Museum, formally hired as Director of Public Education, completed our small nucleus of herpetological educators.

So, as I muddled along in a graduate program, Joe began rewriting (encouraged by Herpetology Curator William E. Duellman and Museum Director Philip Humphrey) the out-of-date and out-of-print guide to the Kansas herpetofauna. That book (Collins 1974) was dedicated "To my parents, to Corson [Hirschfeld, an Ohio buddy], and to the people of Kansas." My copy is inscribed: "To George Pisani with my deepest appreciation for your help in making this book possible."

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People discover their real calling in life at different stages and ages. Joe was quite young when he felt compelled to pursue a career in herpetology, although with just an associate degree the prospects were murky—but Joe was not one to take no for an answer. At age 19, he joined the Ohio Herpetological Society and was subsequently a major contributor in its transformation into the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (SSAR). In 1968, Joe arrived at the University of Kansas Museum of Natural History's Divisions of Herpetology and Ichthyology, hired by curators William E. Duellman and Frank B. Cross to be Vertebrate Preparator—a job title these days more accurately known as Collection Manager.

Work on that first book gave Joe the opportunity to develop further another interest at which he excelled—herpetological photography. That, combined with his writing talent, played an important role in his career.

When Ashton arrived, he quickly enlisted Daryl Karns and Museum artist/exhibits director Thomas Swearingen to produce an abbreviated guide to amphibians and reptiles

(Karns et al. 1974) suitable for use in the Museum's Summer Workshops for Young People. That soon was followed by another title (Cross and Collins 1975), and Joe's path was set.

While Joe's writing was fully supported by Humphrey, who quickly came to realize that these books and the live exhibits were highly beneficial to the Museum's outreach and public image (especially with a State Legislature not always supportive of higher education), the time needed to gather information, draft, and finish a publication inevitably conflicted with the time available for the collection-oriented duties Joe had been hired to do. In the tight budget times that then prevailed, creating additional positions simply was not feasible, nor did some in the Museum feel that would be appropriate, even if funds became available. Joe ultimately did serve as editor of the Museum's scientific publications from 1981 until his retirement in 1997, when he was recognized by The University of Kansas as Herpetologist Emeritus. Also, in 1979, Joe had received the university's Unclassified Employee of the Year Award in recognition of his many contributions.

Humphrey's retirement and the hiring of a new Director changed the Museum's emphasis on this form of outreach.

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Joe Collins on a Kansas Herpetological Society field trip convincing a youngster that he won't let any Copperheads harm her. Photograph by George R. Pisani.

In the fall of 1997, Joe chose to retire and pursue his love of writing and illustrating books and pocket guides on the herpetology and natural history of Kansas. In this he was ably assisted by his wife Suzanne, whose exceptional talents as a photographer (Joe frequently described her images as “exquisite”) added immensely to their many collaborative efforts, most recently a new and greatly improved guide to the Kansas herpetofauna (Collins et al. 2010).

The year his first book was published (1974) also marked the second of Joe's major initiatives—the founding of the Kansas Herpetological Society (KHS). At the time, Kansas had no comparable group, and so this was a *de novo* effort. Regional societies had varying degrees of success, and Joe's wish was for the KHS to have the success of the Ohio Herpetological Society (which had morphed into the SSAR) or the Chicago Herpetological Society. Using the by-laws and organizational structure of the SSAR as a model, Joe organized a small nucleus of local persons, and set in motion what today is one of the nation's most vibrant regional societies. KHS annual activities range from field trips that spot-census herpetofauna in various Kansas physiographic regions (essentially herpetological “bio blitzes”) to an annual meeting featuring a full range of original research presentations and social events. With Joe's encouragement and organizational help, all events are well attended by herpetologists of all interest levels

(hobbyist through university and agency research), often from adjacent states as well as a few more distant.

The field trips (which Joe and Suzanne always attended), in addition to serving as social outings, have documented species new to the Kansas herpetofauna and resulted in many refinements of known species' distributions. One of the most significant values of the trips is to introduce youngsters and accompanying parents to the science of herpetology, and to instill in them a growing sense of a conservation ethic (the vast majority of specimens are simply recorded, photographed, and released where caught). This mix of neophytes and experienced scientists has set a number of people on their professional paths to higher degrees.

In the late 1980s, impressed by Joe's herpetological writing, Roger Conant began to collaborate with him as a coauthor of the renowned Peterson Guide to eastern North American amphibians and reptiles. The 3rd edition of the Guide was jointly authored (Conant and Collins 1991), and Conant intended to groom Joe as his successor, beginning with a 4th edition, despite differences of opinion regarding the status of some taxa. Unfortunately, before those were resolved, disagreements over retaining Isabelle Conant's drawings or substituting Suzanne Collins's photographs in the next edition led to a parting of ways. Roger's death in 2003 precluded any resolution.

A third major initiative dated to 1994, long before most of us appreciated the degree to which the new digital age would affect how we conduct our business. Joe and Suzanne established The Center for North American Amphibians and Reptiles (CNAAR) as a not-for-profit foundation. The name was changed in 2000 to The Center for North American Herpetology (CNAH), primarily to reflect Joe’s view that amphibians, turtles, “reptiles” (= lepidosaurians), and crocodilians are equivalent taxonomic groupings. The foundation’s website is subtitled “The Academic Portal to North American Herpetology,” which at first glance seems a bit pretentious—however, CNAH does fill that role.

With Joe’s vision and the web design skills of Travis W. Taggart (Sternberg Museum and Fort Hays [Kansas] State University), CNAH (<http://www.cnah.org/>) has grown to be a unique outlet for everything pertaining to North American herpetology, available to all at no cost and requiring no password for full access. CNAH features an extensive PDF library (files provided by authors), a directory of herpetologists (those electing to include their own data), employment opportunities, meetings calendar, and links to herpetological websites, societies, academic institutions, online collections, and state and provincial checklists. Regularly emailed updates to a large

database of herpetologists have included announcements of new findings, requests for information or materials for ongoing research, obituaries of herpetologists, and notices of meetings, positions for herpetologists, and new publications. Few herpetologists have remained untouched by CNAH, and a growing number of us have availed ourselves of its services. The CNAH website is truly distinctive, and following Joe’s death was described by a knowledgeable Midwestern mammalogist as “the most organized, best developed specialty website for any vertebrate group.”

Similarly ahead of its day, but ultimately less successful, was *Contemporary Herpetology* (CH), apparently the first effort to establish an open-access online herpetological journal. Joe, along with Jeffrey Demuth, Travis Taggart, and the late Joe Slowinski, who served as the journal’s first editor, founded CH in 1997. Although currently inactive, CH blazed the way for subsequent online efforts and presaged the increasingly greater web presence of all herpetological societies and journals.

Sadly, other initiatives ultimately became divisive. Beginning in 1977, Collins chaired a SSAR committee (currently a joint committee of SSAR, ASIH, and HL) assigned the task of generating a list of standardized English names for U.S. taxa. This led to two co-authored editions (Collins



Joe introduces a group of fascinated youngsters to snakes at the Topeka Zoo. Photograph by Larry Miller, Kansas Heritage Photography.

et al. 1978, 1982) and two additional editions (Collins 1990, 1997) of “Standard Common and Current Scientific Names,” all published as Herpetological Circulars by SSAR and currently maintained electronically at http://www.ssar-herps.org/pages/comm_names/Index.php. In 1997, SSAR officially recognized Collins’s years of service to herpetological studies, which also included CNAH. Subsequently, however, disagreements between Joe and the SSAR over how to proceed led to the publication of competing 5th and 6th editions of the common names lists, one set (Collins and Taggart 2002, 2009) published by CNAH and the other, by the SSAR committee (Crother 2008 and citations therein) and published by SSAR. The initial disputes led to further unpleasantness, which sundered relationships, including some that had lasted many decades. All was temporarily set aside when Joe was honored as one of its founding members by the SSAR at the 50th anniversary celebration in 2007, but many issues remained unresolved.

Joe, like many of us, was quite opinionated. Although he never promoted an idea that didn’t have a firm basis in reality, his motives varied. Some issues were very important to him and he defended them vigorously against detractors. Others, however, were not so much intended to change people’s views as to trigger investigations into questions for which Joe wanted answers. For example, Joe generated (Collins 1991) a list of U.S. taxa then recognized at the subspecific level that, because of allopatry combined with diagnosable characters, could have been (and sometimes should have been) granted status as full species. In the intervening years, some of those taxa have been elevated, some sunk into synonymy, and some remain subspecies. Joe really didn’t care. He maintained that he just wanted someone to generate the evidence needed to clarify each situation. That’s not to say, however, that he had not anticipated the uproar he caused in some circles, or that he didn’t enjoy it. When commenting on folks whose reactions were just short of apoplectic, he’d say something to the effect that he was happy to provide the impetus it took to get someone looking at a particular group—and then he’d chortle in his own inimitable way.

Unfortunately, folks who didn’t know him well or who didn’t (or wouldn’t) differentiate between the really important ideas and efforts to spur research never realized that Joe was nearly always quite willing to agree to disagree—which is not to say that he’d ever let up in his efforts to convert you to his way of thinking.

At a memorial celebration for Joseph T. Collins, held at The University of Kansas Union adjacent to the Museum of Natural History on February 5th and attended by over 200 people representing academia and the general public, two recurrent themes emerged: Joe’s love of all things herpetological (but especially snakes) and his ability to engage people in that passion. Joe was generous with his time, and devoted

much of it to efforts to recruit young people to the discipline. He treated each person, regardless of age, with respect, and acknowledged the value of that person’s contributions in a way that made the recipient of his attention proud. He mentored a number of individuals, some of whom are now professionals in their own right. Several spoke about KHS fieldtrips, during which youngsters would bring their discoveries to Joe. Whether a species new to the state or a few *Diadophis* in a bag, Joe would provide a little context along with encouragement. Everyone left such encounters with smiles on their faces.

Failing to acknowledge that Joe made a number of controversial decisions during his herpetological career would be intellectually dishonest. Some have been more controversial than others, and a few have been, shall we say, incendiary—and cost him friendships that had been built over decades. Taken in sum total, however, Joe’s contributions to the fields of herpetological conservation, Kansas herpetology, professional information exchange, and mentoring those who follow us into herpetological research and conservation are unmatched by few, if any, others. One could not ask for more of a legacy in the field he loved.

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