

personalities, “I wouldn’t change a thing. People who work with animals in the field, whether snakes or birds or rodents or monkeys, find it deeply satisfying and wouldn’t trade it for any other kind of career — even though it may not be very financially rewarding.” And in 1995 he wrote Alice, “If as a young person I could have dreamed of my future and the world I would like to see, it would have been about the same as the life I have had. Getting a Ph.D., having a loving, supportive wife, children like you and John and Chester, grandchildren like Tyson, Lena, and Ben, living on the Reservation, teaching natural history, studying anoles and pitvipers, and making two dozen trips to nine countries in the tropics for herpetological research have all been great experiences.”

One visit, after the Fitches walked me to my truck, I drove back to Lawrence on a sultry Kansas night. A huge moon shone through fog and orange lightning flashed over surrounding fields as I pondered my admiration and affection for Henry. What, I wondered, makes him *tick*? Certainly he marched to his own drummer, unmindful of fads, which makes it all the more fascinating to contemplate his accomplishments, as well as how that stance affected his life more broadly. Maybe verbal frugality reflected limited interest in analytic thought, personally and professionally, which if nothing else protected him from the pettiness so common in universities. Maybe he was always so much within himself that he simply didn’t pay much attention to theorizing. And maybe those like Henry who go deeply into nature as children — he was catching snakes as a five-year-old — are especially prone to immersion as adults. We have to be out there.

Just weeks before Henry died he asked Alice and her husband Tony Echelle, if they might visit a local creek and catch watersnakes. When she replied, “Well, what then dad?” he said simply, “We’ll mark and recapture them.” Evidently the answers to my questions are equally straightforward: Henry was always driven by passionate curiosity and a penchant for detail, accentuated by parental encouragement, and those attributes combined in grad school with a framework for understanding biological diversity that harked back to Darwin and Wallace. That was enough. His approach worked, against formidable odds at times, and he was not inclined to do otherwise. A special gift for field biology and quiet but stubborn confidence must have been obvious to Grinnell in 1931, when an unusually shy but promising new student arrived at Berkeley, fresh off an Oregon pear ranch. Those traits were undiminished to the end, and Henry’s long, happy life was inseparable from the quest to understand nature.

## Reminiscences of Henry S. Fitch

William E. Duellman

Biodiversity Institute, University of Kansas  
Lawrence, Kansas 66045 (duellman@ku.edu)

For the past half century I was fortunate to have been a colleague and friend of Henry S. Fitch. During that time, we served on doctoral committees of one another’s students, co-advised some graduate students, and team-taught a graduate course in reptile biology. Although we never collaborated on a published paper, we each named a species of *Anolis* for the other. Henry avoided university politics and only reluctantly attended departmental meetings. Many of his colleagues mused that Henry lived in his own little world. But that world was much larger than they thought. He was at home on the University of Kansas Natural History Reservation (subsequently named for him), where he conducted intensive studies on the ecology and behavior of reptiles. Over the years he witnessed the succession of hardwood forest on the reservation, while methodically searching this square mile of land, capturing and recapturing thousands of snakes, and logging hundreds of pages of notes. His dedicated efforts culminated with the publication in 1999 of *A Kansas Snake Community: Composition and Changes Over 50 Years*.

However, Henry had a long and distinguished publication record before this finale. While at the University of California at Berkeley prior to moving to Kansas in 1948, he published a classic work on alligator lizards in 1935 and a highly perceptive work on western garter snakes (*Thamnophis*) in 1940. Two of his best-known works are on the natural history of reptiles, especially that on the Five-lined Skink in 1954 and his exhaustive study of the Copperhead in 1960. In addition to these systematic and ecological studies, Fitch provided us with important syntheses—reproductive cycles in lizards and snakes (1970) and sexual size differences in reptiles (1981). Consequently, his publications are cited extensively. A number of years ago, while Fitch was still an active member of the department, the chairman took it upon himself to tally citations to publications by all members of the department. For several consecutive years, Henry Fitch was the most cited.

During the warmer months of the year, the major exception to conducting field studies were the basketball games on the “sand lot” by the Fitch’s residence. Games would involve all members of the family and anyone who happened to be visiting the reservation. Henry displayed his usual dogged determination from his fieldwork to the basketball “court,” and one quickly learned to avoid his elbows under the basket.

In 1967 I introduced Henry to the tropical rainforest in Amazonian Ecuador, where he was the only member of the field party who would work in the field during the torrid afternoons, all the while lamenting the apparent absence of snakes. Customarily he went into his cabin and emerged a few minutes later with a towel wrapped around his middle and untied sneakers on his feet. To get to the dribbling bamboo spout loosely referred to as the shower, he had to cross the dirt “courtyard,” the home territory of a very aggressive goose, which took particular delight in nipping at Henry’s buttocks. One afternoon we heard Henry exclaim “ouch,” as he stood naked snapping his towel at the goose. He was completely unaware that he was the “floorshow” in the middle of camp.

Here I learned that Henry had poor night vision and consequently was primarily a diurnal biologist, but he was constantly amazed that we found so many snakes at night. Only after much cajoling did he accompany us twice on nocturnal forays during a month in the forest. However, I like to think that I influenced much of Henry’s subsequent work in the tropics, where he conducted numerous studies on the systematics and ecology of anoles and on populations and conservation of iguanas.

Henry Fitch was one of the last remaining naturalists. His breadth of knowledge was matched by very few of his contemporaries and scarcely imagined by his younger colleagues. His careful work on natural history is well worth emulating. Our knowledge of animals in nature would be far greater if many more biologists around the world followed in the footsteps of Henry S. Fitch.



Henry Fitch was modest and unassuming — but very competitive in basketball.