

not see the Ringnecks), Henry did exactly the opposite. Thus, I went for the Copperheads in front of Henry with my hook and Henry bent down to get the Ringnecks in front of me (thinking, I am sure, “who is this dummy who does not see snakes right in front of him?”). As we bounced off of each other, Henry stumbled forward, putting his foot right in front of the Copperheads, one of which immediately struck his boot! I could see the headline now: “Famed herpetologist killed by venomous snake; new grad student to blame.”

Fortunately, the snake managed only to clip the front of Henry’s boot, and we quickly captured both Copperheads and at least some of the Ringnecks. After flipping a few more shelters, we had a total of four Copperheads, three of which were marked individuals, one as long as nine years ago. I found this nothing short of amazing, having only recently read that high recapture rates were impossible for snakes, and said as much to Henry. He shook his head and said: “If I had just a few more fences and more shelters, I’d have a 100% recapture rate.” I glanced at Henry, trying to decide if he was saying this in jest or if he was angling for a compliment. I quickly realized that neither of these was true; he genuinely felt that he had simply not worked hard enough and needed to do more to satisfy his own standards. What a great example for a new Ph.D. student!

A few years later, I got to see a second example of Henry’s genuine humility regarding his fieldwork when the noted lizard ecologist Laurie Vitt visited the Reservation. Knowing that Laurie was especially interested in lizards, Henry made sure to check the shelters where he knew Slender Glass Lizards could be found, and we quickly got several of them. When Laurie said something to the effect of “are you going to publish anything on these?” Henry indicated that the sample size was still too small for a solid publication. Laurie asked: “How many of them have you found?” thinking (I am sure) that the answer would be a hundred or so. Henry’s response floored us: “About 1,500 so far,” he said rather casually. When we tried to convince Henry that 1,500 glass lizards was nothing short of phenomenal and far more than anyone else had, he just shook his head and said he needed more data! By the way, Henry did publish a monograph on these lizards in 1989; the sample size was 2,216 individuals captured 3,353 times! (Fitch 1989).

In addition to doing field research with Henry, I was also lucky enough to be his TA for the last two courses he taught at KU, Vertebrate Natural History and Animals of Kansas. Both courses were combined lecture/field trip formats and my main role was driving students to and from the field sites and helping in the field any way that I could. Although Henry’s lectures were detailed and comprehensive, the fun part of both classes was the field trips. Students enjoyed trying to “challenge” Henry by bringing him whatever odd insect, snake skin, or mammal dropping they found, then having him act as a living version of Wikipedia and proceed to lecture them on everything that was known about the species under question. One of my favorite memories was when a student found a newly hatched Five-lined Skink and asked Henry how much the tiny lizard weighed. Henry held the lizard for a few seconds and then replied: “1.15 grams.” The class immediately burst out laughing at the absurdly precise answer. So, the whole class walked over to the old, dilapidated building that Henry called his “lab” and we proceeded to weigh the skink on an old triple-beam balance. Sure enough: 1.15 grams! Somewhat awed, one of the students asked, “How could you possibly know that?” Henry’s response was typically low-key: “When you have processed over 5,000 of something, you know their weights pretty well!”

Given Henry’s low-key approach and humility, it would be easy to conclude that he was not competitive and that he would let his grad students get away with things. Neither conclusion would be true. I recall quite well the first time Henry came to my study site in northwestern Missouri where I was doing mark-recapture studies on snakes. After catching our first snake of the day, I marked it using scale-clipping (no PIT tags in those days) and proudly showed it to Henry. “Oh,” he said, “I guess you don’t want to be able to recognize this snake if you capture it again?” This was Henry’s way of telling me I was not marking properly, and the message was delivered loud and clear. To this day when I scale clip snakes, I follow Henry’s methods and can tell you, they work extremely well.

Henry’s competitive nature may be illustrated by something only a select few got to experience, something called “Fitchian Basketball.” Henry always had a grass/dirt basketball “court” set up outside his front door and during the spring of 1980, his current students got a taste of how competitive Henry Fitch could be at times. There were eight of us that day, three women (Nancy Zushlag [Henry’s master’s student], my wife Nadia, and Jim Knight’s wife, Karin), and five men (Henry, myself, and three of Henry’s other students: Larry Hunt, Luis Malaret, and Jim Knight). When the time came to play, Henry started explaining the “rules”; first, there were two hoops, one at 10 feet, the other at 8 feet. The 10-foot hoop was for the guys, the 8-foot hoop for the women. Next, there were odd but very specific rules about the men and women taking the ball out separately, whether the women could be guarded, and how the points were tallied. What we all found most amusing was how new rules suddenly appeared whenever someone scored against Henry’s team. My personal favorite was “no jump shots from the corner,” which just happened to be my best place to shoot from. Needless to say, we all spent more time laughing than we spent playing, as watching Henry morph into this competitive jock was something none of us had seen before.

Basketball finished, we then got to see a fine demonstration of Henry’s character. Henry was due to retire that year and it fell to our group of graduate students to find an appropriate way to celebrate Henry’s many achievements. With the help of Joseph Collins, Bill Duellman, and many others, we organized a symposium at the 1980 herp meetings in Milwaukee, with many of Henry’s former students presenting papers. We also planned to publish a volume based on that symposium, which appeared in 1984. After lunch, we sprang all this on Henry, including a plaque made especially for the occasion. Henry was deeply moved (Virginia was in tears), but I could tell that while he was clearly touched, part of him was saying to himself: “I need to get out there and check the shelters...”

No discussion of Henry could possibly be complete without mentioning Virginia. Her pride in Henry’s accomplishments and her irreplaceable role in his life cannot be overestimated. Watching her beam from ear to ear during our symposium honoring Henry in 1980 was a joy to watch. For me (and Nadia), Virginia was more like a grandmother than the wife of my major professor. From giving us furniture when we were starving grad students to giving our son his first tricycle, her warmth and devotion to Henry and his students was truly remarkable.

As I think of Henry now, I see him heading off to do another “round” at the Reservation. May he always have as many shelters to check as he could ever want, and may his traps always have many marked snakes. When his morning rounds are over, he’ll be headed back home, where Virginia has lunch waiting.

Henry Fitch: The Twilight of an Incredible Career

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I first met Henry Fitch in 1968, forty-one years ago, while visiting a friend in Lawrence. I’d read many of his papers in the course of my studies, and when I met him again in 1970, I was again impressed by two things beyond his vast store of knowledge. At age fifty-nine he could, while making a round in the field, walk the legs off many people far younger. And, for someone whose many papers had essentially established the field of snake ecology as we now know it, he was incredibly unassuming and reserved (except when playing the, ummm... *rules-modified*, basketball games that then were a Reservation feature event).

Many herpetologists accompanied this remarkable man into the field in the course of his long, distinguished career. It was my distinct privilege



SHARON MAGAN, COURTESY OF CHESTER FITCH

Henry Fitch at the entrance to the Fitch Natural History Reservation, 1997.

to be among them at various times, and to work with him during the final few years of that career. Our close professional relationship really began in the mid-1980s with our collaboration on Timber Rattlesnake telemetry. I built an effective (albeit awkwardly maneuverable) antenna. Using that and some transmitters (immense by current standards!) assembled by Dr. Tony Shirer, and which Henry pushed gently down the throats of large rattlers, we spent a summer gathering movement data that retrospectively turned out to be more a learning experience about the technique than about the snakes. Henry assimilated all this, and nearly 20 years later, when we had far better equipment and far more background knowledge on the subtleties of using it, we were able to initiate an ongoing study of this species in northeast Kansas.

In 1987 Henry and I received funding from Oklahoma Dept. of Natural Resources to study rattlesnake roundups and their effects on the populations of Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes. It was no secret that Henry's long-term enthusiasm for rattlesnake study wasn't shared by his wife Virginia, perhaps out of recognition that his reflexes were slowing, as do everyone's with time, hampering the avoidance response essential for such work. It's one thing to dodge the feint of a 2-foot Copperhead, but quite another to dodge the long strike of a 5-foot *Crotalus*. Virginia's reaction was subdued apprehension. But after some discussion we agreed to handle the captive snakes after cooling them, a reassuring model that Virginia accepted, and which proved effective for safely gathering the morphological data we sought.

Henry's enthusiasm for field work and for learning all there was to learn about snake ecology never diminished, though by 2002, time plainly was having its inexorable effect of limiting bone and muscle. In these later years of his career, I had retired and so was able to help him make rounds in the field using one of the field station's "Gator" ATVs. I drove while Henry's gaze was fixed firmly on our destination of the day, wherever it happened to be. By 2003, he was gamely trying to maneuver using crutches on a local ledge that served as a Timber Rattlesnake den. I emphasized to him that I didn't plan to be remembered as the guy who brought him back from the field with a severe envenomation or a broken leg, and so he agreed (perhaps acquiesced is a more accurate term!) with a change of model—I'd do the rough and tumble stuff and he'd wait in the 6-wheeler to share in the results, and we'd collaborate on papers that, of course, required his incredible store of knowledge. Or, if topography allowed, he'd hunt close to the 'Gator while I ventured further. That model worked well through the remainder of the time he was able to live independently on FNHR, and other persons, younger than either of us, pitched in to help Henry make productive rounds in the field safely. Notable among these are Scott Sharp (a high school teacher in a nearby district) and his family, and KU undergrads Mike Zerwekh and Joey Brown.

As late as 2006, the "Henry and George team" (which I once pointed out to him had an average age of 79, a realization he greatly enjoyed) still made joint rounds, these in my Smooth Earth Snake study area not far from FNHR. This was a species he'd barely seen, with just 3 FNHR records. He was fascinated by the fact that the species was so close, yet he'd seen so few. When on our first trip into that area I caught the first of several we subsequently found in tall grass habitat, his reaction was to look at it intently and softly remark, "Well, I'll be damned." I think it was the only time I heard him say that! I'm glad I sent him the final draft of the article summarizing that research. When I emailed it to his daughter Alice, his primary caregiver by then, I asked her to "tell Henry he has to stick around to see this in print." Planned publication was for December 2009. Alice read it to him and afterward told me how attentive he'd been and how he'd enjoyed learning about this elusive species.

On 8 September 2009, just a few months shy of his centennial birthday, Henry Sheldon Fitch passed away, leaving for science one of the most outstanding legacies of ecological study ever known. Best known for his extensive long-term study of the herpetofauna of what in 1948 was The University of Kansas Natural History Reservation (renamed in 1986 the Fitch Natural History Reservation [FNHR]), his published studies in animal ecology extending back to 1933 also include a wide range of birds, mammals, and invertebrates, as well as the local successional flora of their habitats. Harry Greene, interviewed by the *Lawrence Journal-World*, accurately reflected on Henry's legacy by stating, "It's not an exaggeration to say that Henry's the father of snake biology." His studies on the ecology and relations of these many species were refined through his extensive career to reflect his unique insights regarding the way they form communities of interacting organisms. All of us who continue to build on this legacy, and those who follow us and will do the same, owe a tremendous thanks to this modest man of great talent.

Literature Cited

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Note.—All of Henry Fitch's papers published by the University of Kansas are incorporated in the Biodiversity Heritage Library, where they can be downloaded at www.biodiversitylibrary.org. The family suggests donations to honor Professor Fitch be directed to the Henry and Virginia Fitch Memorial Fund at the KU Endowment Association: <www.kuendowment.org>.



COURTESY OF ALICE F. ECHELLE

Henry Fitch (right) in an ultralight plane in March 2004. His nephew flew him over the area where he had grown up near Medford. This is a good indication of Henry's spirit of adventure and love of travel — characteristics he never lost.