

IN MEMORIAM

Paul Austin Johnsgard, 1931–2021**Charles R. Brown***^{ORCID}

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Ornithology lost a giant on May 28, 2021, with the passing of Paul A. Johnsgard in Lincoln, Nebraska. The author of more books on birds and natural history than any other person living or dead (by a factor of 2), Paul was also key in initially publicizing the spectacular spring migration of Sandhill Cranes in Nebraska's Platte River Valley that well over 2 million people have enjoyed over the past 50 years. Very few ornithologists have had as large a collective impact on science, education, and conservation as Paul Johnsgard achieved in his remarkable almost 90-year life. He was an Elective Member (1970) and Fellow (1981) of the American Ornithological Society.

Paul Austin Johnsgard was born June 28, 1931 in Fargo, North Dakota and spent his childhood in the nearby small town of Christine. His interest in the outdoors started as a small child by walking along railroad tracks collecting wildflowers for his mother. He credited a mounted Red-winged Blackbird in a glass dome case in his first-grade classroom for kindling his obsession with birds, and he was profoundly influenced by his first-grade teacher, Ms. Evelyn Bilstead, who encouraged the shy, scrawny, nearsighted 6-year-old to follow his dreams wherever they might lead him. The gift of a copy of F. H. Kortright's *Duck, Geese, and Swans of North America* when he was 13 hooked him for the rest of his life on waterfowl and led to much of his later original research on this group of birds. Paul's prolific book production might have been predicted in high school when he enrolled in a typing class, which required special permission because at that time only girls were allowed to take typing! Paul later said it was a wonder he even developed an interest in biology, because his high school biology classes were taught by a coach who knew no biology, and when Paul enrolled at the local community college (North Dakota State School of Science, 1949–1951), the same coach had been hired to teach biology there as well. It was not the last time that Paul would have major issues with football coaches!

Upon transferring to North Dakota State University to complete his undergraduate degree, Paul fell under the influence of the Cornell-trained J. Frank Cassel, who encouraged Paul's ornithological interests. Cassel made Paul aware of a \$25 scholarship available to students desiring to do research over the summer, which Paul



Paul A. Johnsgard, July 2006 (photo by Linda R. Brown)

received, and for the scholarship, Cassel suggested Paul do a bibliographic survey of the waterfowl of North Dakota. Paul created a card file summarizing what was known of each species and later expanded it to include all the birds of North Dakota, illustrating it with his own line drawings. When the work was published as a 16-page booklet by a local printer, the basic outline of how he would later produce scores of similar but far more substantive books was born.

Enrolling at Washington State University to do a Master's degree under Charles Yocom, Paul was quickly advisor-less when Yocom left for another university within 2 weeks of Paul's arrival. It was a trying time in which Paul tried to make do with a committee composed of a botanist, a mammologist, and a wildlife biologist, and he came perilously close to switching permanently to botany. But he also was able to interact with Don Farner, James King, Jared Verner, and Alan Wilson who were also at Washington

State, and they may have helped him stay in ornithology. During that time, he met and in 1956 married Lois Lampe, a plant ecologist, and they remained married until his death.

Paul's Master's degree was an ecological study of a sand dune region of Washington called the Potholes. This research first led him to observing and describing waterfowl courtship behavior, which was to figure prominently in his later PhD work. When Paul published some of his initial waterfowl observations in *The Condor*, he received a somewhat nasty letter from Charles Sibley of Cornell, castigating him for not being aware of Konrad Lorenz's recent paper on duck courtship (published in a German-language journal). But Sibley also extended an invitation to Paul to join him at Cornell for his PhD, a school the ever-frugal Paul was interested in but had rejected applying to for his Masters because of the \$25 application fee!

Paul's actual PhD research at Cornell was a comparative study of the evolutionary relationships of the North American mallard-like ducks using observations of courtship behavior. Sibley gave him free rein as long as the research looked at species relationships, and Paul found Cornell to be the most stimulating intellectual environment he was ever in. He completed his PhD in about 3 years.

While engaged in his waterfowl research, Paul worked one summer as Sibley's research technician. Sibley was demanding and tyrannical, and students quaked at his temper and treated him like a god. (Paul could never bring himself to call him anything to his face except "Dr. Sibley" to the day Sibley died, even though they stayed relatively close long after Paul left Cornell.) At the time, Sibley was experimenting, without success, in using blood proteins as a taxonomic tool, and was about to give up entirely on molecular analyses of avian taxonomy. However, being a voracious reader of the literature, Paul encountered a paper by Robert McCabe and H. F. Deutsch in *The Wilson Bulletin* (1952) that reported interspecific differences in egg-white proteins of gamebirds. That approach seemed promising to Paul, but he dared not risk Sibley's wrath by suggesting something that differed from the strict protocols he had been assigned by the master. So, Paul surreptitiously began replicating the McCabe and Deutsch work with captive birds at Cornell. When Paul was completely sure of the results, he worked up the nerve to take them to Sibley, who immediately appreciated their significance. This later led to Sibley's well-known DNA-DNA hybridization work that shook the avian taxonomic tree to its very roots. Paul always seemed slightly bemused by the seminal role he had in Sibley's influential research.

Paul crossed Sibley again when Paul sought a postdoc at the Wildfowl Trust in England, then at its peak with the largest collection of captive waterfowl ever assembled. Sibley wanted to apply for funding for the Trust work with Paul designated as his assistant. Paul rejected that idea, not wanting to be under Sibley's continued control, so he

applied to the National Science Foundation on his own, receiving support for two years in which he continued his comparative behavioral studies of ducks and geese. This led to Paul's first major book, *Handbook of Waterfowl Behavior* (1965), which was the first comprehensive comparative survey of behavior for any group of birds.

Paul was always refreshingly oblivious to academic formalities. At the 1959 International Ethological Congress in Cambridge (UK), on one evening Paul encountered a packed dining hall where he observed Sibley sitting at a table with others that was slightly elevated. Seeing a vacant chair next to Sibley, a naïve Paul sat down only to encounter an incredulous stare from Sibley who informed Paul that one had to be invited to sit at High Table! Embarrassed, Paul quickly started to leave, only to have the others there laugh and tell him to sit down. The High Table diners who wanted him to stay included later Nobel laureates Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen, and Lorenz became Paul's friend and helped him secure a Guggenheim Fellowship.

While still at the Wildfowl Trust in the fall of 1959, Paul learned from Sibley that a job for an ornithologist was open at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), with Sibley commenting that "Nebraska would not be a bad place from which to look for another job." All Paul knew about Nebraska is that it was second only to North Dakota for prime waterfowl habitat and duck production, so he applied sight unseen. He was offered and accepted the job as an instructor without an interview or visit. Paul was promoted to assistant professor with tenure after only 1 year as an instructor. Within 6 years, Paul had become a full professor; he always believed his was the shortest time it had ever taken anyone to go from instructor to full professor at UNL. During his subsequent ~40 years at UNL, Paul received the university's three highest honors: the Distinguished Teaching Award, the Outstanding Research and Creativity Award, and an Honorary Doctor of Science, a rare trifecta among biologists at UNL. He taught introductory zoology, ornithology, ecology, and animal behavior to more than 7,000 students during his teaching career and supervised 12 PhD and 13 MS degrees.

Paul's arrival in Lincoln began his lifelong love affair with Nebraska. He explored all corners of the state but was particularly fond of the Nebraska Sandhills and the Platte River Valley. One of his early explorations in spring 1962 first took him to the Platte after he heard rumors of Sandhill Cranes in the area. At the time, the spectacular 600,000-crane migration each spring along the Platte was not well known except to locals, and certainly wasn't a multimillion-dollar tourist attraction as it is today. When Paul and his class reached Elm Creek and turned south toward the river, he was astounded to see thousands of cranes in nearby cornfields. That trip fixated him on cranes, and later he was to write multiple books and consult on a film about them, and he became a dedicated popularizer of the

Platte River crane phenomenon. Sandhill Cranes were his favorite bird, and he became more closely associated with them than any other single person. Probably not a spring went by in the next 50 years that he did not venture out to see them, usually multiple times, and his last trip was just a few weeks before his death.

Paul's arrival in Nebraska also started his prolific writing career that continued unabated until a few days before his death. Depending on how revisions and collected essays are counted, he wrote 105 books. Originally his interest was in writing encyclopedic monographs of particular groups (e.g., waterfowl, cranes, cormorants, bustards, sandgrouse, pheasants, quail, brood parasites, owls). Although he traveled, often internationally, to collect data or secure photographs for these books, some people (including likely envious colleagues in his own department) criticized his monographs as having no original work. Nonetheless, his books summarized a vast amount of material on select species, and virtually all serious scientists beginning research on these species in the late 20th century (in the pre-Birds of the World Online era) would consult a Johnsgard book as a starting point.

Paul usually had multiple book projects going simultaneously, sometimes 7 or 8 at once. He compulsively worked on his books, often being one of the few people in the biology building on weekends, holidays, or evenings. Only football Saturdays deterred him from coming into his office, and he was an outspoken critic of Nebraska football, dismayed by the diversion of university resources into it. He feuded with legendary Nebraska coach Bob Devaney, and it was fitting that when the Omaha and Lincoln newspapers published their lists of the 100 most influential Nebraskans of the 20th century, Paul was right there alongside Devaney. Paul's 100+ books occupy about seven feet of bookshelf space, include over 20,000 pages of text, and contain at least 2.75 million words. Many of his books were illustrated by his own line drawings or photographs.

As Paul traveled more in Nebraska and elsewhere, he became increasingly concerned with preservation of threatened habitats and considered it important to make

people aware of the natural history surrounding them. This led to a series of books targeted for a general audience, including some quite lyrical ones on cranes, Snow Geese, the Sandhills, the Platte River, the Niobrara River, the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone, prairie birds, and the natural history of Nebraska. Particularly after his retirement from UNL in 2001, he worked increasingly in conservation and outreach, often collaborating with the crane sanctuaries along the Platte or local Audubon societies to preach the importance of preserving natural environments. He detested the irrigation industry for the way they drain the Ogallala Aquifer and divert water from his beloved Platte River. His conservation work was recognized by the American Ornithologists' Union in 2012 with the Ralph W. Schreiber Conservation Award, and he received countless other awards throughout his career for both conservation and his books.

As a personal reflection, I first met Paul in July 1981 when I visited UNL's Cedar Point Biological Station in western Nebraska to scout it as a possible site for Cliff Swallow research. Paul was teaching ornithology there and took an immediate interest in my work. He encouraged me endlessly in the early years of my research and kindled my lifelong love for Nebraska. We had a close friendship for 40 years even though I was never formally associated with him or UNL. My experience with him was not unique, and he nurtured many young biologists from both UNL and elsewhere. I will miss my friend's dry wit, cheerfulness, and the twinkle in his eye, as will countless others he touched during his enormously influential life.

Paul is survived by his wife Lois, son Scott, daughters Ann and Karin, six grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

I have drawn heavily for this memorial from an essay about his life that Paul first published in 2010 and later updated (<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/zeabook/30/>); a relatively complete curriculum vita is also included there. I thank Scott Johnsgard, Karin Johnsgard, and Valerie O'Brien for their comments and/or suggestions.

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