

# Oliver H. Hewitt

*May 21, 1916 — January 27, 1999*

To encapsulate the numerous and varied contributions of this enormously popular, energetic and productive Professor of Wildlife Management through his 50 years of exemplary service to Cornell, is challenging. His career developed in two distinct segments: 22 whirlwind years in teaching and research, ending in early retirement in 1971 at age 55; followed by 27 years as Emeritus Professor residing on Florida's southwestern coast, where he taught "Fundamentals of Ornithology," his wildlife specialization, to all interested persons, including alumni through Cornell's Adult University (CAU) programs. Also much involved with others to conserve this area's rich bird life, he sparred often with developers, striving to save fragments of critical habitat.

Oliver H. Hewitt was a native Canadian, born at Blind River, Ontario, later naturalized a U.S. citizen. He received a B.A. degree from McMaster University at Hamilton, Ontario, in 1939, having majored in Zoology and Chemistry. That year he also matriculated in a Master's program in Vertebrate Zoology at Cornell with Arthur A. Allen, "America's First Professor of Ornithology." Following award of the M.S. degree in 1941, Ollie Hewitt continued with Allen for the Ph.D. degree, pursuing interests in waterfowl ecology, and receiving the degree in 1944. Dr. Hewitt then joined Canada's new Dominion Wildlife Service, starting in enforcement as a Migratory Bird Officer. After World War II, changes at Cornell included formation of a Department of Conservation in 1948. Based in the College of Agriculture, it brought together in Fernow Hall scattered positions including vertebrate specialists from Zoology, a fishery biologist from Entomology, and several foresters from a former Department of Forestry. Arthur Allen's Laboratory of Ornithology was already present in the building. His diverse accomplishments had included working with other national leaders such as Aldo Leopold, to establish the new discipline of Wildlife Management. When Oliver Hewitt started his Master's program, Dr. Allen had just completed a year as second President of the Wildlife Society, which he had helped to form.

When Oliver Hewitt accepted one of the new faculty lines in Conservation in 1948-49, he became Cornell's first Professor of Wildlife Management, joining an academic community notably advanced in the incipient field. Ollie already possessed a thorough familiarity with Allen's wildlife program; he had instructed in the courses, knew field study sites, was acquainted with most of his faculty colleagues, and even knew many of the New York conservation agency staff with whom he would be working. These advantages boosted him into high productivity from the start. His strong personal traits combined admirably to facilitate his immediate and sustained success in teaching and

mentoring roles with both undergraduate and graduate students, and interactions with his professional colleagues. Essentially, he exuded a wonderful good humor, always cheerful, positive, and enthusiastic. As his students still comment, it simply was fun to be with Ollie, and often exciting, too, for he was always exploring new challenges in imaginative ways. These are especially well illustrated by the new research methodologies he developed, including census methods and techniques for animal capture and handling.

Dr. Gustav A. Swanson was the head of Cornell's Conservation Department for 18 years (1948-66). He and Ollie collaborated on a number of projects, including a seven-year stint as lead editors of the *Journal of Wildlife Management*. Gus assumed the editorship in 1949, and proceeded without assistance until 1951, when he persuaded Ollie to become Associate Editor to help with editing and proof reading. The *Journal* grew and prospered under this management. In mid-1953, Ollie took over as Editor at the young age of 37. While he had three associate editors, all at other locations, Ollie continued to introduce valued innovations, and reported enjoying particularly the numerous associations it brought with authors and other members. He retired from the editorship in 1956, but later served The Wildlife Society as Vice President in 1958-59.

From 1961-67, Ollie Hewitt functioned as Assistant Leader in the new federal Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit at Cornell, which directed special assistance to graduate education. In 1965, he and Cornell animal nutritionist, J. Thomas Reid, became co-directors of a two-year study comparing cattle and gazelle as human food sources in Kenya. A sabbatical leave following in 1967-68, allowed Ollie to spend a year in Africa consulting on wildlife problems and teaching a post graduate honors course in wildlife management at the University of Pretoria. Professor Hewitt's first book, *The Wild Turkey and Its Management*, a 589-page tome for which he was sole editor, was published in 1965 by The Wildlife Society and was remarkably successful. Its appearance was coincident with the extensive natural restoration of turkey habitat accompanying regeneration of our Eastern forests on lands released from farming. The ensuing restoration of the wild turkey in America stands as one of the most significant wildlife success stories of our time.

Also in 1965, concerned for the poor opportunities undergraduate students then had for studying marine biology in a field setting, Professor Hewitt joined with five other Cornell professors to plan a summer course at the Isles of Shoals in the Gulf of Maine. Dr. Hewitt's role is now permanently remembered on a bronze plaque in Founders Hall at Cornell's internationally recognized Shoals Marine Laboratory, which grew from these small beginnings. In the early years, evenings on an otherwise uninhabited island ten miles offshore were enlivened by Ollie's stories about his own youthful experiences as a conservation officer, bringing government by small boat to the isolated

coastal villages of the Canadian northeast. The theme of these stories involved how to cope successfully with wildlife problems and difficult political, social, and personal conditions of these tiny, isolated, marine-dependent communities. Ollie's formal lectures and informal stories resonated deeply among 30 students embraced by the rumbling sound of the restless sea.

That first year, anticipating the need for students to observe different species of nesting marine birds on other islands, Ollie Hewitt—fearless by nature and impervious to rigid academic bureaucracy—persuaded his dean to provide a budget of \$200 for that purpose. With it, he obtained a sixteen foot, homemade, wooden boat at Rye, New Hampshire, then ran it solo over ten miles of open ocean to Star Island. These characteristics, and that action, made Ollie Hewitt an instant hero to the students—but also enabled him to demonstrate the nests that established new breeding records in North America for two species of marine birds. With the exception of one absence while in Africa, Ollie Hewitt continued teaching summers at the Shoals until tragic events overtook him.

Early in 1971, Oliver Hewitt's beloved wife, Jean, succumbed to a brain tumor after an extended illness. To the great surprise of many, Ollie retired that August, and soon left Ithaca. The Cornell Board of Trustees named him Professor Emeritus at their October meeting. Abruptly, the significant presence of both Ollie's family and his professional role on campus had ended. For 22 years, the Hewitts—Ollie, Jean, and daughters Eleanor, Nancy, and Virginia—until this tragedy, had maintained a special brand of hospitality for visitors at their home, from entering freshmen to distinguished international scholars.

In his brief academic career of 22 years, Ollie directed 38 advanced degree candidates, wrote more than fifty journal articles, and served annually some 20 to 25 undergraduate advisees, and numerous others who sought his sage counsel.

In 1972, Ollie married a family friend of long standing. He and Martha Hewitt enjoyed a new life together at Port Charlotte, Florida, on the West Coast. The presence there of Professor Perry W. Gilbert, a fellow graduate student of Ollie's and another of the six founders of the Shoals Lab, probably influenced that move.

The following 27 years of Ollie's life constituted a virtual continuation of his academic career, changed only in context from formal classroom to informal adult education. What Ollie undertook primarily as a volunteer for almost three decades, represents a shining example of a regional extension-wildlife specialist's program in ornithology, for it involved a newspaper column and collaboration with professionals in organizations such as local Audubon groups and the Florida Division of Wildlife. Also, he wrote the basic text for this audience, entitled,

*Field Book of Birds of the Florida Suncoast*, his second book; it appeared in 1976. Professor Perry Gilbert has commented that, despite the geographic restriction in its title, this book serves the entire peninsula well.

In Florida, Dr. Hewitt continued an active correspondence with many of the students he had mentored at Cornell. In addition, he remained directly connected to the university in several other important ways. He was much in demand as speaker at alumni gatherings, and he joined with Professor Emeritus Richard B. Fischer to conduct CAU programs in the Everglades. Ollie's longest and strongest Cornell ties, however, remained with the Library of Natural Sounds at the Laboratory of Ornithology. With constant resolve, Ollie pursued and recorded songs of rare and unusual bird species in the wild, demonstrating special efforts that won him high acclaim. Library Director Greg Budney regarded Ollie's annual trips north to deliver his recordings of inestimable academic and commercial value, as a high point in the Library's year!

Throughout his life, Oliver H. Hewitt's relationships with students and the public embodied the ultimate in personal consideration and helpfulness. In Florida, he was also effective as an activist, employing strategies to confront, contest, and educate developers whose actions threatened special habitats in this region of extremely rapid development. Testimony to these characteristics poured forth from his citizen-clientele at a memorial service following his death in Florida. More quietly, perhaps, Oliver Hewitt's impact on individuals will be genuinely lasting, as his inspiration and knowledge are passed along from one generation to the next, and the many teachers who once listened intently and walked with him in the field, strive to emulate his enthusiastic, caring, helpful, and effective approaches to education and to life.

*John M. Kingsbury, Milo E. Richmond, Harlan Brumsted*