BioOne COMPLETE

IN MEMORIAM: FRANK ALOIS PITELKA, 1916–2003

Authors: Koenig, Walter D., and Sherman, Paul W.

Source: The Auk, 121(3) : 963-965

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1642/0004-8038(2004)121[0963:IMFAP]2.0.CO;2

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Downloaded From: https://complete.bioone.org/journals/The-Auk on 29 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://complete.bioone.org/terms-of-use

In Memoriam



The Auk 121(3):963–965, 2004

IN MEMORIAM: FRANK ALOIS PITELKA, 1916–2003

Walter D. Koenig[1] and Paul W. Sherman[2]

[1]*Hastings Reservation, University of California, Berkeley, 38601 East Carmel Valley Road, Carmel Valley, California 93924, USA; and*
[2]*Department of Neurobiology and Behavior, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853, USA*

Frank Alois Pitelka, a member of the AOU since 1937, an Elective Member since 1944, and a Fellow since 1948, died of prostate cancer on 10 October 2003. He was born in Chicago, Illinois, on 27 March 1916. He earned his B.S. at the University of Illinois (1939) and his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley (1946), where he remained for his entire academic career. He retired in 1985 but continued to come regularly to the campus until 1999, when failing health forced him to join his daughter in southern California.

Frank's ornithological career began in the 1930s while growing up in suburban Chicago. Although he dismissed his upbringing as distinctly non-academic, early on he joined the Chicago Ornithological Society, where he was taken under the wing of several local birders, including Nellie Johnson Baroody, in whose honor he would later endow an AOU student presentation award. During his college years, Frank published eight ornithological notes and a detailed account of the breeding biology of the Black-throated Green Warbler.

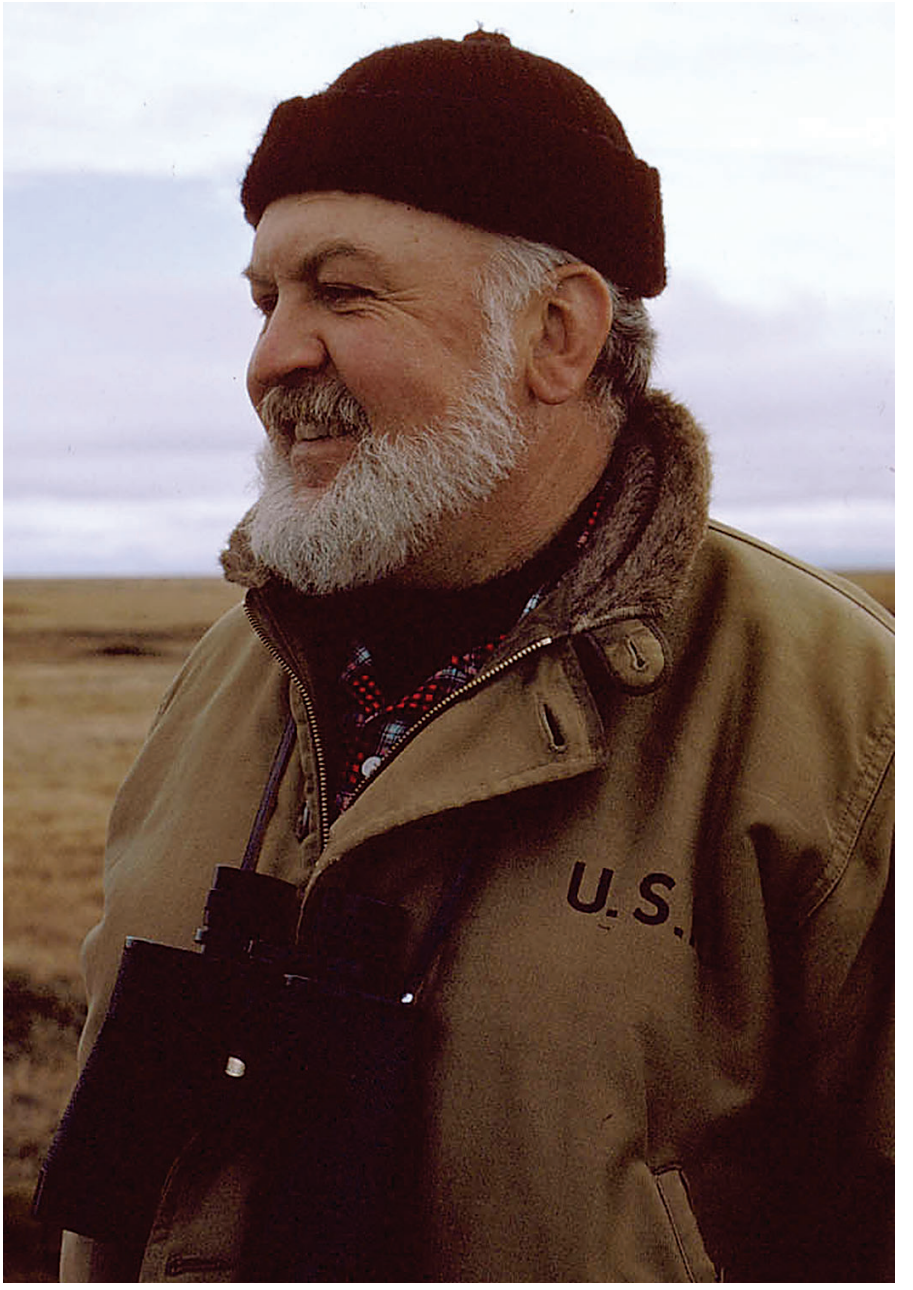
After graduation, Frank spent the summer of 1939 at the University of Washington's Oceanographic Laboratories in Friday Harbor, and then moved south to the University of California at Berkeley for graduate work under Alden Miller in the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ). A venerable MVZ tradition during that era involved staff and students making extensive field collecting trips throughout western North America and Mexico. Frank eagerly joined several of those expeditions, and for his Ph.D. investigated variation and speciation in *Aphelocoma* jays. Although he presumably chose that genus because of its taxonomic interest, Frank's field observations of the jays kindled an interest in the evolution of social behavior that was to form the first of two major focuses of his research career.

Frank's second major research focus was population regulation. That interest developed soon after he was hired as an Instructor in Zoology and Assistant Curator of Birds in the MVZ. Gradually, his attention shifted from taxonomy to ecology, spurred along by an invitation to work at the recently established Naval Arctic Research Laboratory (NARL) in Barrow, Alaska. Thus began an annual migration between Berkeley and Barrow that Frank undertook for 30 years as he and his students studied the population cycles of lemmings and their avian predators. Later, they investigated the behavior and ecology of other Arctic-breeding birds, particularly calidridine sandpipers.

A proud and unabashed naturalist, Frank belonged to that earlier generation of field biologists for whom collecting specimens, obtaining distributional data, studying life histories, and observing behavior were of paramount importance. He was especially in his element in the stark natural beauty of northern Alaska, where he enthusiastically trundled across the tundra to collect vagrants and observe the social and reproductive behavior of the avifauna. As described memorably by David W. Norton (in *Fifty Years Below Zero: Tributes and Meditations for the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory's First Half-century at Barrow, Alaska*, University Alaska Press, 2001), Frank became one of the station's most colorful summer residents.

Frank's bibliography comprises more than 150 publications. His professional awards include the William Brewster Memorial Medal (1980) from the AOU, the Mercer (1953) and Eminent Ecologist (1992) awards from the Ecological

Downloaded From: https://complete.bioone.org/journals/The-Auk on 29 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://complete.bioone.org/terms-of-use



Frank Alois Pitelka, 1916–2003
(Photograph taken by Peter Connors in 1975 at Barrow, Alaska)

Downloaded From: https://complete.bioone.org/journals/The-Auk on 29 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://complete.bioone.org/terms-of-use

Society of America, a distinguished teaching award (1984) and the Berkeley Citation (1986) from the University of California, Berkeley, and a Lifetime Alumni Achievement Award from the University of Illinois (1993). In addition, he was a Guggenheim Fellow, a visiting scholar in Charles Elton's laboratory at Oxford University in 1949–1950, and an elected Fellow of the Animal Behavior Society (1989). He served on numerous federal committees and panels and held editorial positions at several journals, including *Ecology* (editor, 1962–1964), *The Condor* (associate editor, 1946–1962), and *Studies in Avian Biology* (editor, 1984–1987). Because of his Czech heritage, he treasured most his honorary doctorate in biological sciences from Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic (1997).

Those achievements notwithstanding, Frank's greatest contribution to science was in the realm of nurturing students, their ideas, and careers, as manifested by the 6 M.S., 37 Ph.D., and 11 postdoctoral students whom he mentored, and by the new ideas in the field of behavioral ecology that were spawned in his lab. Fourteen Ph.D. and six postdoctoral students who studied with Frank are currently AOU fellows. A list of his doctoral students who became primarily involved in avian work was published as part of the "academic family tree" for Loye and Alden Miller (*Condor* 95:1065–1067). Frank's postdoctoral students are listed in an announcement of a celebration held in honor of his 80th birthday (*Condor* 98:671–672).

Once Frank accepted a student, he provided him or her with critical intellectual assistance and emotional support when needed, and gently but consistently nudged the student to get out into the field and on with research. Frank would look over his half-rim glasses with a twinkle in his eyes, raise his eyebrows, and ask, "Well, doctor, what's going across your desk these days?" Keenly aware of both current and past developments in the field, Frank was able to put each nascent idea into its broader historical context, comment knowledgeably and enthusiastically on it, and thus inspire us to scurry excitedly back to work.

Frank's nurturing approach enabled him to transmit not only his appreciation for "old fashioned" natural history, but also his enthusiasm for good science. He was particularly eager to foster interchange between his students and the international scientific community. He hosted dozens of campus visitors and organized several small meetings, such as *The Great California Woodpecker and Acorn-storing Symposium* (*Condor* 76:230–231) and an international symposium on shorebird behavior and ecology (*Studies in Avian Biology*, no. 2). Conversely, he exhibited disdain for anything that got in the way of doing good science, as well as for political decisions based on emotion rather than solid evidence. For example, he opposed the recovery effort for the California Condor, which he felt was misdirecting huge sums of money to a species that was headed toward extinction long before human interference.

Beyond his influence through his own students, Frank's larger-than-life personality made him an important and respected influence on the careers of numerous young ornithologists, ecologists, and behavioral ecologists throughout the world. He regularly attended AOU and Cooper Ornithological Society meetings, where he was a colorful and enthusiastic participant, asking penetrating questions, adding insightful comments, and making it clear to everyone around him that getting to the heart of a question was the key to having a good time.

Frank was also intrigued by artistic beauty and achievement in myriad forms, from the ability to express himself in several languages (using appropriately colorful and amusing gestures and expressions), to his devotion to opera, which he and his wife Dorothy attended regularly in San Francisco and in Europe until her death in 1994.

Frank's love of good conversation over fine wine and fine cuisine was legendary. He frequented many of Berkeley's chic restaurants regularly enough to be greeted by name on arrival and then escorted to his favorite table where, through each course, he would hold forth with wit, insight, and compassion. The passing of "Papa Frank" is truly the end of an era. He will be greatly missed.

Frank and Dorothy, who met as graduate students at Berkeley, are survived by their three children: Kazi, a professional violist in Altadena, California; Louis, an ecologist and director of the University of Maryland's Appalachian Laboratory in Frostburg; and Vince, a ceramicist and professor at the Appalachian Center for Craft in Cookeville, Tennessee.

We thank Anne Caulfield, Karen Klitz, and Lou Pitelka for their help in preparing this memorial.

Downloaded From: https://complete.bioone.org/journals/The-Auk on 29 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://complete.bioone.org/terms-of-use