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In Memoriam Brian G. Palestis
6 October 1973-28 January 2020



Brian Palestis working with Common Terns in Barnegat Bay, New Jersey.

Waterbird biologists, ornithologists, conservationists, evolutionary biologists, faculty and students of Wagner College, his academic family, Meghan and his family, and many others were deeply saddened by the untimely death of Brian G. Palestis. Brian was a devoted, quietly determined, and caring biologist who was able to work tirelessly to understand the evolutionary basis of the behavior and ecology of the birds he studied. He shared with many, a long-term commitment to the Common Terns in Barnegat Bay, to Wagner College, to the Waterbird Society, and to his family. He was equally committed to the pure and practical sides of science. Brian lost his long bout with brain cancer, but he tried many treatments and therapies, both for himself and to advance knowledge of cancer treatment. Even during this time, he continued writing, editing manuscripts for PloSOne, and performing his duties to the Waterbird Society. He even went out into tern colonies in Barnegat Bay, gazing in awe and pleasure at the terns swirling above our heads.

Brian was born in Somerville, New Jersey, and was raised in Pompton Lakes, where he was valedictorian of his high school class. It was there he learned to love fencing, a pursuit he continued to follow, to master, and to mentor others in. He competed in the Garden State Fencing Games and Junior Olympics, and Junior National Team. He was also on the football team. In addition, he played the cello in the orchestra and electric bass in a jazz band– exhibiting his wide range of interests that he maintained throughout his life.

Brian graduated from Princeton University with his B.S. degree in Ecology and

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Evolutionary Biology (Magna Cum Laude), where he did field work off the coast of North Carolina in 1994 for his senior thesis – "Mulitmare Harems in Feral Horses." He was a fencer at Princeton Valley for 4 years, and was Honorable Mention All American, Academic All-Ivy, and Sabre Squad Leader in 1995. His team won Ivy League Titles in 1994 and 1995, finished 4th in the 1994 NCAA Championship, and he won the Cointe Award for his outstanding sportsmanship and this Championship. His interest in fencing was life-long, and he continued fencing and mentoring students in fencing until his illness.

Princeton University was also where Brian met Meghan Sullivan. They married in August 1997, and had two children, Connor and Caitlin. They honeymooned in Hawaii, which led to their love of foreign travel, with subsequent trips to Spain, France, Ireland, Alaska, Greece and the Caribbean.

Brian earned a PhD in Ecology and Evolution from Rutgers University in 2000, with a dissertation: "Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) recognition systems: recognition of siblings, nest sites, and nest predators." He spent many days and months in the field in Barnegat Bay, and in the laboratory testing how chicks learn to recognize parents, siblings, and predators. It was at Rutgers that he bonded with his advisor and siblings (the authors of this memorial), gained a deep love and appreciation for colonially-nesting birds, and committed his academic life to understanding the evolutionary aspects of birds, and to his students and colleagues.

After post-doctoral positions at Barnard College and Monmouth University, in 2001 Brian joined the Department of Biological Sciences at Wagner College on Staten Island, New York. He received tenure in 2006, became full Professor in 2012, and held the Martha Megerle Endowed Chair. He served as Departmental Chair for three terms and chaired the Academic Policy Committee for many years. His formal classes included Evolution, Animal Behavior, Biodiversity and Ecology, Biostatistics and Environmental Design, and Natural History of the Mid-Atlantic States, but his real love was involving students in his research and teaching, encouraging them to let their minds follow where the science led them, instilling enthusiasm and appreciation for behavioral systems. Students at all levels signed up with him to study the behavior of zebra fish in the laboratory, resulting in zebrafish of all sizes and sobriety sitting or swimming in tanks all over campus. This allowed students to observe, collect data, and do statistical analysis, and even led to student publications.

At Wagner Brian won the Faculty Award for Excellence in Scholarship two times, and also won the Faculty Award for Excellence in Teaching. His continued research and publication provided an important role model for students at Wagner, as well as for his colleagues. He was a role model in other aspects of his students as well, as he continued to serve as a volunteer assistant coach for Wagner's fencing team until a few months before his passing.

One of Brian's important and endearing traits was his ability to collaborate with colleagues, and these collaborations led to many important experiments and discoveries. He continued to study the reproductive behavior and population dynamics of Common Terns in Barnegat Bay with J. Burger. Brian concentrated on understanding the adult survival, breeding dispersal, and low recruitment of Common Terns within a few colonies, Burger examined large-scale colony changes in population dynamics and sea level rise. Together they formed a picture of declining colony numbers, decreasing habitats, loss of islands, low recruitment, and dispersal of adults (often to colonies farther north). His paper on the role of behavior in tern conservation (Palestis 2014) provides a classic example for us all. His recent paper on low recruitment (Palestis 2018) and adult survival (Palestis and Hines 2015) provides the mechanisms of Common Tern declines in Barnegat Bay. Brian also collaborated with I. Nisbet, J. J. Spendelow, J. Hatch. P. Szczys and many others on morphometics sexing, and sexual selection in Roseate Terns (*Sterna dougallii*). Another of his productive and interesting collaborations was with Robert Trivers, Rutgers Professor of sociobiology

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and evolution, who worked extensively with human populations in Jamaica. Together they published papers on foot asymmetry, fluctuating asymmetry with age, and running performance as a function of lower body symmetry. He published over 30 papers in a number of journals, including Animal Behavior, Waterbirds, PloSOne, Current Zoology, Auk, Symmetry, Evolutionary Psychological Research, and many others. He reviewed for many of these same journals. He was also a good "citizen" of science, providing comments to others on their research, publication, and career goals, and contributing data as a citizen scientist to New Jersey Audubon and New City Audubon.

The Waterbird Society is deeply indebted for the over 20 years that Brian devoted to our society, its organizers, and its researchers and students. During his involvement, Waterbirds evolved into an international society devoted to the conservation and scientific study of the world's waterbirds. This included branching out to hold meetings in Central and South America, and in Europe, which Brian always attended enthusiastically. Brian served on the Council for the Waterbird Society, chaired the membership committee, and was currently chairing the publications committee.

His family remembers him as generous, selfless, and humble, and rejoices in his life and accomplishments. He taught them to love, appreciate, protect and conserve nature and the great outdoors. He was a loving son, brother, and husband. He was devoted to his family, including his children (Connor and Caitlin), numerous nieces and a nephew, and an aunt and uncle. Brian and his family spent many vacations in Maine and along the Jersey shore. His parent's house along the shores of Barnegat Bay provided a safe and convenient field base for his ongoing studies in Barnegat Bay. It was there, as a youth he developed his love and interest for terns and the marshes.

Many of us remember other things about Brian that will keep him forever in our hearts: his calm clear manner, his steady walk through the halls at Rutgers, his sitting back watching 1-day old tern chicks make their way through a choice maze, his willingness to help any of us at our research sites, his devotion to collecting small packets of feathers from terns for metal analysis when his mentor had a broken leg, his expert boat-captain abilities through rough waters of Barnegat Bay, his careful collection of "poop" samples for DNA analysis, his long hours devoted to the conservation and protection of the birds we love, his devotion to fencing although we didn't understand its appeal, his ability to keep working while fighting brain cancer, and our total dismay and devastation when his distraught wife called with the news of his passing.

Brian was gentle, soft-spoken, and quiet, but he was a great teacher, an impressive scholar, and a devoted friend. He will be deeply missed by his family, friends, colleagues, the conservation community, and the birds he devoted his life to studying and preserving.

Acknowledgment

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