

Frederick A. Ulmer, Jr.
1916 to 1995

Charles Wonderly

On September 13, 1995, Fred passed away after a long illness. He was a longtime member of our club. He joined in 1939, was voted a Fellow in 1947, an Honorary Member in 1995, served on council, and was conservation chairman for many years. A true birder, and an excellent mammalogist, he was well known and recognized among professional mammalogists. Four species were named after him — a fish, snake, plant, and a protozoan. He was curator of mammals at the Philadelphia Zoo for 27 years. Imagine being responsible for about 2,500 animals. He was able to breed Cheetahs for the first time in any zoo. He also bottle-fed a Polar Bear or two, and raised them in a playpen in his home in Roxborough with the help of his wife, Kay, and his two daughters, Christine and Kathleen. Many other baby animals would never have made it without their care.

Fred graduated from West Philadelphia High School. Gene Stern and he were in the same class. After school he volunteered at the Academy of Natural Sciences, often riding there by bike from 56th and Market Streets.

I first met Fred at the Comstock Society of Naturalists Group, which met at Boy Scout Headquarters on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Some of the leaders of the club were also D.V.O.C. members, Norman J. McDonald, Mark Robinson, Howard Boyd, and John T. McNeill. Some of the Boy Scouts were Herb and Dave Cutler, Dale Twining, and Roy Imsick. One of the Comstock Field Trips was a weekend at Pocomoke Swamp. Four or five of us drove down on Friday night. Somehow we slept in a small cemetery on the edge of the swamp. Fred had brought some mouse traps and decided to set them. I said I would hold the flashlight. Fred then pitched a mosquito bar and climbed in. We spent the night killing mosquitoes and after daylight we found one trap missing and only caught three crayfish.

Some time later he was invited by Dillon Ripley to go on an Academy trip to the East Indies for three months. They returned with a live, twenty-one pound Black Gibbon, a Civet Cat, two Bay Owls, and many other specimens for the Academy and the Philadelphia Zoo.

In 1940, Fred was drafted into the Army Medical Corps. He was stationed in Virginia. The Comstock Society took a field trip to Dismal Swamp and some of us visited Fred. Luckily we were able to find him and was he surprised. He reached into his foot locker and took out a large cloth bag and said, "How about taking this to the zoo." It was a six-foot Black Snake. Fred spent most of the war in England on a hospital train. He became the First Sergeant of his company and also became acquainted with many British naturalists and spent a lot of time at the London Zoo. He came home on a freighter in charge of the first shipment of animals and birds from Europe to the Philadelphia Zoo after the war. The Philadelphia Zoo offered him a job, and he became the first Curator of Mammals. He was a very conscientious, hard

working, and inventive curator. He designed outdoor cages with moats around them for elephants, lions, and tigers, etc.— the first zoo to have them, thus allowing visitors to better see the animals. One of his problems was Monkey Island. The monkeys learned to swim and then climbed the barrier walls. The new Cheetah compound is dedicated to Fred.

Another story about Fred: One cold winter's morning he received a phone call from a friend on the New Jersey coast about a small dead whale on the beach. He gathered some tools and a tarp and drove down. He found a very rare Beaked Whale about twenty feet long. He did his usual measurements, etc., then cut off its head and, with help, put it on the back seat of his car, opened all the windows, and took it to the Academy for its collection.

Through Charlie Mohr, another D.V.O.C. member, he became interested in banding and studying bats. So for many years we banded bats in mines, caves, attics, and belfries, winter and summer. I held the bat by the wing tips, he snapped a #00 bird band on its left wing. The returns were mostly our own. One little brown bat lived fourteen years. After many bites we learned a few bats carried rabies — no more banding.

There were many other trips and Christmas counts. Our CBC territory was Cape May Point. We found a few good reports. A female Western Tanager, a couple Western Kingbirds, and the first Northern Saw-Whet Owl for the count. Fred picked it from its roost and we took it to Ernie Choate, and then put it back in the cedar tree. Fred was a self-taught naturalist and always thoroughly verified his reports. He also published many scientific papers.

Fred and Kay moved to Roxborough soon after World War II and we came to D.V.O.C. together. I remember the old meeting room on the top floor, alongside the 300,000 bird skins on trays in large containers. No problem to check out any bird. Fred had a remarkable knowledge of information on mammals, birds, plants, and other fields of natural history. He had instant recall and often the scientific name. He continued his services even after retirement as a consultant to the zoo and a volunteer at the Academy and other sources in which he was interested. His collections and notes have gone to the Philadelphia Zoo and the Academy of Natural Sciences and his collection of animal slides to the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education.

To quote Fred, "A world without wildlife would be a pretty dull place."

—451 Flamingo Street, Philadelphia, PA, 19128