

Obituaries

Robert H. Sehl (1917-2001)

The Delaware Valley Ornithological Club lost one of its staunchest members when Robert H. Sehl of Philadelphia, PA passed away on October 17, 2001. He was 84 years old. He had been living at Paul's Run Nursing Home in Northeast Philadelphia at the time of his passing. His accomplishments as a club member were innumerable. We owe Bob a debt of gratitude for all he has done for the DVOC.

Born in April, 1917, Bob graduated from what was then West Chester State Teachers College. Soon after that, he began teaching mathematics in the Philadelphia Public School system at the high school level. He was a dedicated teacher who taught at Olney and Northeast High Schools. He also served as a night school principal, first at Ben Franklin and later at Northeast.

Bob joined the DVOC in 1939. Bob's birding skills were honed by the Julian Potter and Fletcher Street era. He was well respected by all of the early club members. He soon became very active in club affairs. He rarely missed a meeting. He participated and ran many field trips. He was President of the DVOC in 1962-1963. Perhaps Bob's greatest accomplishment was the establishment of the DVOC Endowment Fund. All life membership money goes into the fund. Bob was also the chief trustee of the fund for many years. Dividends from the Endowment Fund are a very important source of income to help cover the annual operating expenses of the club. For these and other accomplishments, Bob was named a Fellow and an Honorary Member.

David Cutler's first recollection of Bob was in 1942, when he and Bob went to find a "Hungarian Partridge" in Pennsylvania Dutch country for their life lists. They were in the company of Bill Yoder, Eve Kramer, Herb Cutler and Bob Newman in an old Hudson auto. Dave recounts that Bob Sehl was the one who kept everybody honest in their bird identifications. When Dave told Bob of his misery with Solid Geometry, future trips with him were always accompanied by Dave's homework and a math book. Bob even tutored Dave before DVOC meetings. Bob was also one of the original birders to participate in

the infamous "Cutler May Runs" to Delaware and he was part of the 205 species day in the Fifties, which was at that time a USA record.

Young Alfred Kronschnabel first met Bob in 1943 at a boy scout camp where Bob was a counselor. Many of the old-time DVOC members became interested in birding through the scouts. At that time, there was a Birding Merit Badge which had to be earned, so scouts had to learn to identify birds. Al and Bob became regular birding companions in 1948 at Camp Hart in Sumneytown, Pennsylvania in the area known as the Unami Valley. At that scout camp, Bob was the assistant camp director and Al was a counselor. Bob and Al subsequently went on many birding adventures together. The shorter trips were usually in Al's vehicle, either a station wagon, truck, or van, and frequently in the company of Ron Logan. One of the most memorable long trips was one to Guatemala and Belize in "Rocky's" C-47 prop plane, which could hold 22 people. How many of us have gone on a birding trip in a private plane? How cool is that? Bob and Al remained close friends right up to the time of Bob's death.

I first met Bob in 1982, shortly after I had joined the club. We were participating in the DVOC October Weekend, which began on Saturday morning at Barnegat Light and ended up at Alan Brady's house in Cape May on Sunday. Saturday was a cold and blustery day, and birding conditions were poor. Bob had his telescope propped against the Barnegat Lighthouse door to try to get out of the wind. He somehow managed to find a Caspian Tern in a flock of Royal Terns on a sand bar at an incredible distance out in the inlet. I was amazed by his skill and tenacity. When Bob walked along a trail in spring, he would put a name on every song and call that he heard, to my astonishment. I wanted to be able to do the same thing, and with Bob's help, in a few years, I could. I was able to enjoy many other birding trips with Bob, Al Kronschnabel, Harold Jackson, and sometimes John LaVia or Ron's son Brian Logan. At each birding stop, one had to literally drag Bob away, such was his enthusiasm.

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Bob was a complex person. He was very meticulous when it came to numbers. Rumor had it that he knew his net worth from moment to moment, but he was just as upset when he had more money than expected than less. Bob could argue over 50 cents, but give a needy person or organization hundreds or even thousands of dollars. Bob had a tremendous sense of fair play. It was important to Bob that one stuck to one's principles. Two of the bequests in his will were

to the Nature Conservancy and DVOC, organizations in which he strongly believed. Bob had a birth defect that had deformed one arm, but he never let the handicap hold him back. He and his wife Rachel decided not to have children. Bob had told me that he was too afraid that the defect would be passed on. As a young boy, Dave Cutler had naively asked Bob , "What happened to your arm?" Bob replied, "They put it in my brain".

Frank Windfelder

