

William N. “Mac” McFarland

September 11, 1925 — August 31, 2004

William N. “Mac” McFarland, an Emeritus Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (formerly the Section of Ecology and Systematics) and an internationally recognized expert in the visual physiology and sensory ecology of fishes, died on August 31, 2004, in Mt. Vernon, Washington. He was eleven days shy of his 79th birthday.

After graduating from the California Maritime Academy and serving in the Merchant Marine and Navy during WWII, Mac matriculated at UCLA where he earned his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees. His early professional work, including his graduate work done as a consulting biologist for Marineland of the Pacific, involved mostly osmotic regulation and the development of methods for safely transporting and anaesthetizing marine species. He continued with these themes while a Staff Physiologist at the Institute for Marine Science of the University of Texas at Port Aransas and, starting in 1961, as an Assistant Professor at Cornell in the Department of Zoology.

He developed an interest in the visual system while a student at UCLA, but it was not until 1965 that he and a “buddy” from grad school days, Fred Munz, published what was to become a long string of seminal papers on the visual pigments and visual ecology of fishes. By combining visual pigment and environmental light measurements they made predictions and speculations about the ecological significance of visual pigment spectral position that have stood the test of time. Together with his students, postdoctoral fellows and many collaborators, Mac continued to publish papers on this theme (as well as fish behavior and polarized light vision) until his death.

Mac was a consummate teacher and presenter. His lectures were always well prepared and delivered, but what really set him apart was the enthusiasm he injected into any discussion. Although he was involved in a number of courses and seminars, he will certainly be remembered for his contributions to two courses, Comparative Physiology and The Vertebrates. The latter ultimately led to a multi-authored book, with Mac as an original co-author that has gone through several editions.

How Mac found the time we don’t know, but he managed the usual committee and administrative work here as well as the kind of national and international responsibilities that come with excellence and respect in one’s chosen field. He became a Faculty in Residence on North Campus, and served as Chair of Ecology and Systematics twice, the last ending with his retirement in 1989. After retiring from Cornell, he moved to California where he became Director of the Wrigley Marine Science Center and an Adjunct Professor of Biology at USC. He served in this

capacity for five years after which he moved with his family to San Juan Island and continued his studies on fish vision as an Adjunct Professor at the Friday Harbor Labs of the University of Washington. There he remained active, and was working on several manuscripts when he died.

He will be remembered for his wisdom and humor. If he taught those of us who worked with him anything, it was that having fun doing science is as important as doing the science itself. Gifts in his name can be made to the Graduate Student Research Fund in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology.

John Heiser, Simon Levin, Ellis Loew