

Richard B. Fischer

January 19, 1919 — August 7, 2005

Richard B. Fischer was born in Boston, Massachusetts on January 19, 1919. Soon thereafter, his family moved to Flushing, New York, where he spent his childhood and public school years. Following public school, he attended Queens College, from which he received the B.S. degree in 1942. As a child, Dick was a victim of poliomyelitis, which left his right arm partially disabled. Even so, he found ways to interact with his natural environment so that it became his playground and his lifelong laboratory, and for the rest of his life he was a dedicated, productive environmentalist.

Dick earned his M.A. degree at Columbia University in 1943, and taught secondary school science in the schools of Malvern, Lindenhurst, and Scarsdale. He entered Cornell University in 1948 as recipient of a graduate fellowship in vertebrate zoology. As a graduate student, he studied intensively the biology and breeding behavior of chimney swifts, under the supervision of one of the world's greatest ornithologists—Arthur A. Allen. He completed his doctoral thesis on that topic, and was awarded the Ph.D. degree and elected to the position of Assistant Professor of Rural Education in 1953. (Rural Education at that time included undergraduate and graduate education in Field Natural History.) He became Associate Professor in 1956 and on the basis of his outstanding teaching and a prodigious array of publications, was promoted to full Professor of Rural Education in 1965.

Over the next several decades, Dr. Fischer continued an amazing schedule of published writing as well as his schedule of popular classes in environmental education. Molded in the long Cornell tradition of natural history by superior naturalists such as Liberty Hyde Bailey, Dick Fischer became synonymous with Field Natural History, the course with which he was identified. His ever popular classes in that subject were always filled, and had a waiting list. At the same time, he seemed always pushing the limit on publishing popular works on field biology. Dr. Fischer was a prolific author and editor of natural history subjects. He was editor and senior author of McGraw-Hill's 14-volume series, *Our Living World of Nature*. He wrote many articles for *The New York State Conservationist* magazine, and served on the advisory board of *Ranger Rick Magazine*, published for children by the National Wildlife Federation. He was the natural history representative on many boards and associations, and was closely associated with policy and educational writings of such outstanding societies as the John Burroughs Society and the Roger Tory Peterson Institute. It is difficult to list any outstanding natural history periodical or organization to which Dr. Fischer was not an active contributor or didn't serve on its board in some way.

But it was as a Professor of Field Natural History that Dr. Fischer became best known. He carried on in the long-standing tradition of Anna B. Comstock and E.L. Palmer, concentrating on educating young people from public schools through university by direct experiences with living things. He could challenge and hold spellbound young audiences by hands-on experiences with goldenrod galls, the structure of a red-eyed vireo nest, or the shed skin of a garter snake. His classes were always filled, and weather was no obstacle. His students stood in the rain, snow, or glaring sun—spellbound by his clear, spirited explanations of the nature around them. He was equally in demand by schools and environmental organizations. He helped to organize, and for many years directed, the Arnot Forest Workshop for Teachers, which over a period of more than a decade, prepared public school teachers for expanding science courses to include native plants and animals and their relation to the human environment. Ever cognizant of, and committed to improving environmental quality, he labored for years to introduce legislation in the New England states and New York to limit, and then to prevent, tossing of soft-drink bottles. Roadside litter became a mere trickle because of his unyielding environmental commitment.

Dr. Fischer served as a chairman and as a committee member for many Cornell graduate students seeking advanced degrees in environmental education or conservation. He spent days and occasional nights in the field, sharing educational experiences and support. An example was a three-day trip with a graduate student research team studying reproduction in New York State black bears. Picture Dr. Fischer seated at a woodland breakfast one morning with his arm draped around a drugged adult female bear!

As with many professors, Dr. Fischer also enjoyed an array of surprising pastimes. He was an accomplished woodworker. He also thoroughly enjoyed deer hunting, and each fall for many years he went to the Adirondacks with two colleagues to hunt deer. His conversations around the campfire would have been a library treasure!

As the chairman or member of many graduate student committees over the years, Dr. Fischer was a pleasantly critical resource. The theses completed under his direction were rigorous, creative, and enlightening. He chaired a number of Ph.D. committees, and many more Masters committees. An articulate and demanding author himself, his graduate students produced impeccable theses. and later many quality publications in their own right—with knowledge and skills developed and honed by Dr. Fischer.

One might think an outdoorsman such as Dr. Fischer was a big, rough, stern man. On the contrary, he was of slight build with a big heart and a steely curiosity. Once, while accompanying a grad student on a wildlife study for the student's graduate degree, he sat in a wilderness cabin observing a white-footed mouse on a sill. The question came up about what the mouse could have been feeding on in that cabin. Dr. Fischer, ever the curious

naturalist, dispatched the mouse with a round of dust shot, opened the stomach, and found some seeds, which he proceeded to sample. His verdict: touch-me-not, or jewelweed. That was the ever-curious Dick Fischer in action! He embodied the curiosity, the dedication, the tenacity, the insight, and the educational leadership of many famous Cornell professors with whom he studied and worked: the world-famous ornithologist, Arthur A. Allen whose popularizing of ornithology led to establishing Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology; Anna B. Comstock, founder of the Nature Study Movement in New York State and author of the *Handbook of Nature Study*; E.L. Palmer, author of many Cornell Nature Study Leaflets and author of the *Fieldbook of Natural History*; and Eva Gordon, a dedicated Nature Study proponent and author of Cornell Nature Study Leaflets for public-school children. Dick Fischer not only stood on the shoulders of Cornell's greatest natural history professors; he became one!

Retiring from his professorship in 1985, Dr. Fischer continued to be active, especially with his long-term study of bluebirds. He attached nesting boxes to posts around meadows of Tompkins and surrounding counties, keeping meticulous notes on the nesting and breeding behavior of the species. He and a colleague, Harlan Brumsted, assisted by Dr. Fischer's wife, Mary Margaret, wrote *Voices From Connecticut Hill*, detailing both the human and the natural history of this hill near Ithaca where he had led so many field trips, and conducted the Arnot Forest Workshop.

One cannot travel to the forests, streams, prairies, or mountains of the West, the Eastern Shore, Texas, the Rockies, or Alaska without bumping into someone who has studied under, read about wildlife from, or met someone who was a student of, Dr. Fischer. His "stamp" is on so many who occupy positions of classroom leadership, authorship, state or national conservation policy, or general knowledge about the world of nature!

As a living memorial to the impact of Dr. Fischer on the natural environment of the Ithaca area, his many admirers purchased and set aside through the Cornell Plantations the Fischer Old Growth Natural Forest, a 34-acre stand in Newfield, New York. It symbolizes Dick's long love of unspoiled nature, and exemplifies the natural areas of this state that thousands of citizens know more about, and appreciate more because of the dedication of this remarkable professor. Dick was one of Cornell's finest!

Plagued by a series of malignant tumors in his last years, Dr. Fischer died in Ithaca on August 7, 2005. He is survived by his wife of decades, Mary Margaret, herself an outdoorswoman of note, and three children—Peggy, now a Florida resident; Dick, a Texas attorney; and Jonathan, a language teacher in New Hampshire. At his request, Dr. Fischer was cremated and his ashes scattered above the Beaver Kill in New York's Catskills, where he carried

out his research on chimney swifts, and where he, Mary Margaret and children had spent many summer weekends camping and “naturing.” No Professor of Education will be missed more, or remembered with greater love, than this remarkable Cornell naturalist, Dick Fischer!

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