



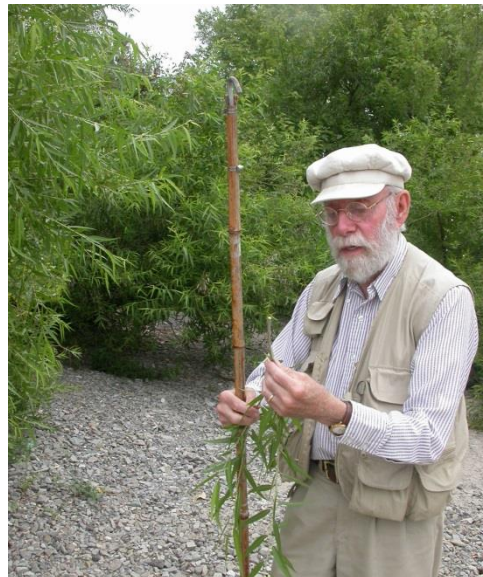
Editorial

George W. Argus, salicologist for lifeIrina Belyaeva^{1,2*} and Keith Chamberlain³¹ Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, TW9 3AE, UK² Russian Academy of Sciences, Ural Branch: Institute Botanic Garden, 8 Marta, 202A, 620144, Yekaterinburg, Russia³ Rothamsted Research, Harpenden, AL5 2JQ, UK*Corresponding author. Email: i.belyaeva@kew.org

Published on line: 30 April 2014

This April saw the 85th birthday of one of the world's greatest salicologists, George W. Argus. Despite having retired, officially, almost 20 years ago he continues his scientific research, editorial work and the identification of specimens at the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa where he is Professor and Curator Emeritus. He also runs workshops on the identification of willows anywhere that he is invited to do so.

However, he did not start his career as a botanist, having studied engineering at Valparaiso University, Indiana, and subsequently worked as a labourer on the Alaskan Railroad and a lineman's assistant in the Alaskan gold mines. It was in this special environment of mountains and glaciers that he developed a lifelong interest in natural history,



Ottawa, local field trip, 2006

especially in geology and palaeontology and completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Alaska in biology and geology in 1952. After a brief spell as a surveyor on the Juneau Icefield Research Project George entered the US army as an instructor in arctic techniques. He was a founder of the Alaska Alpine Club and while he was in the army, in April, 1954, George joined with three others in an expedition to climb Mount McKinley (Denali) in what was to become an impressive story of survival in extreme conditions.

Their aim was to climb McKinley from the south and descend on the north side and after trekking for 40–50 miles with heavy packs they reached the starting point for their pioneering ascent of the South Buttress. Despite finding the conditions more difficult than they had expected they reached the 20320 ft summit on May 15th and began their descent in high spirits. Unfortunately, their mood did not last as a tragic accident happened leading to the death of Elton Thayer, the expedition leader, and a serious leg/hip injury for George Argus. Even

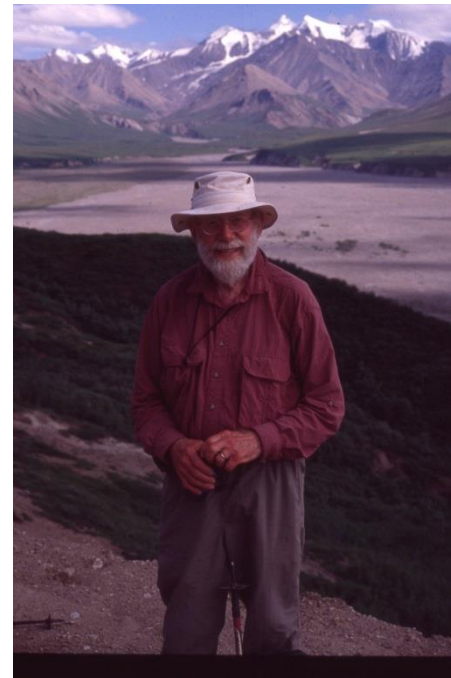


Two weeks after the fall, 1954

after several days he still could not stand so the other two, Morton Wood and Leslie Viereck, improvised a sled and were able to move George further down the mountain to a safer position. Leaving George at 11000 ft with most of their remaining provisions and the shelter of a tent they made the difficult and long return to Kantishna in record time where they were able to organise a helicopter rescue for him. George was finally

rescued after spending a week alone, carefully rationing his supplies and in great discomfort with a dislocated hip and deranged knee and only the stories of Mark Twain to occupy himself. In the 60 years since that expedition George has been in the mountains and in Alaska many times but never really done that sort of climbing again.

After completing some ecological projects in Alaska George continued his studies at Wyoming University where he obtained a master's degree in botany and developed his interest in willow taxonomy under the supervision of John Reed. He published the first of his numerous works on willows (see below), 'The Willows of Wyoming' (1957). He completed his PhD at Harvard University in 1961, under Reed Rollins with the help of Hugh Raup. The latter remained as a mentor and role model for



George Argus at Denali, 2004

George who later named a new species, *Salix raupii* Argus, after him. From Harvard George moved to the University of Saskatchewan where he taught plant taxonomy and phytogeography for nearly a decade. Whilst there, he studied the willows of Alaska and the Yukon, including a few summers spent in the field collecting plants, which later resulted in the publication of the book 'The Genus *Salix* in Alaska and the Yukon' (1973). He also developed the DELTA database of willows which evolved into the Interactive Identification of New World *Salix*:- <http://aknhp.uaa.alaska.edu/botany/salix-salicaceae-identification-using-intkey/> .

After a couple more positions he settled in Ottawa as the curator at the Canadian Museum of Nature where he has remained ever since, at some point achieving Canadian

citizenship by reciting the names of all the provinces and territories of Canada. For 22 years, he was the Canadian botanist with CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) and started the Rare and Endangered Plants Project, for which he was awarded the George Lawson Medal by the Canadian Botanical Association. However, his heart was always



Measuring the height of a tall *Salix arctica* Pall. on Attu Island.
Photo by Steven Talbot

with Salix and he made a great many field trips, sometimes accompanied by his wife Mary and their five children, studying willows in North America and Siberia, where he met and collaborated with Alexei Skvortsov.

George Argus has recently published a treatment of Salix for Flora of North America (2010) with which he has been involved since 1985 as a member of the editorial committee. He is currently working on a treatment of Salix of Saskatchewan with Anna Leighton that will be published soon. He has agreed to write a coauthored revision of the Gleason



and Cronquist Flora of Northeastern United States and Canada, and hopes that he will have the energy to write a key that will include over 40 species ranging from Wisconsin to Labrador and south to Virginia. He is also resolving a number of typifications and identifications.



Despite his eminence he is very modest and is always ready to help anyone with a query or a problem concerning Salix and to fit it into his busy schedule. He has even accommodated his salicologist colleagues in his own house and driven them on local field trips in his car with the unique number plate, SALIX.

George was the son of German immigrants who ran

a bakery in New York and has retained his inherited talent for baking bread and pancakes to this day. While at high school George had no academic inclination and no idea of what he wanted to do in the future but he developed an interest in photography which has also remained one of his many hobbies. His outdoor activity hobbies have included hiking, cross country skiing and canoeing and currently his main pastimes are country dancing and music. George is a staunch member of the local choir. Living with his family on a small farm he has tried his hand at subsistence farming, keeping bees, raising chickens and ducks and growing wheat and oats. Now, his large garden includes a small willow nursery so that he can continue to study aspects of the biology of North American willows.



George and *Salix arctica*, Anchorage, Alaska 2011



George, conducting a willow identification workshop, New York, 2005. Photo by Julia Kuzovkina



Local field trip, Ottawa, 2006



George and his 'little' farm, 2006

During his very successful life George Argus has adhered to some advice given to him by Hugh Raup, that whatever you do in life it should be fun and as soon as it stops being fun, stop doing it. It seems that George must still be having lots of fun. Long may it continue.

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