In Memoriam: James Ray Dixon, A Texas Herpetological Icon (1928-2015)

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Abstract.—The Governing Board of Herpetological Conservation and Biology invited CTM and MRJF to deliver a memoriam for one of the most important Texas herpetologists in history. Their take is without a doubt, an intimate portrayal of the personal and professional relationship they and many others had with this icon of Texas herpetology.

Key Words.—herpetologist, history, James R. Dixon, Texas

Introduction

Dr. James Ray Dixon (1928-2015) passed away peacefully at age 86 on 10 January 2015 from complications of stroke in Bryan, Texas (Fig. 1). Jim "Doc" Dixon was born on 1 August 1928 in Houston, Texas, and spent most of his childhood in the border town of El Campo, Texas. Like many herpetologists before him, Jim had a very early interest in amphibians and reptiles, and even, as a child, attempted to hide a young Alligator mississippiensis under his hat so he might sneak it into his mother's house. He searched the environs for occupants near his home with the same interest and vigor that would be the basis of a first-class academic profession. Jim would eventually settle down with his family in Bryan, Texas, and spend the past 43 years at a home familiar to family and colleagues, alike. To say that Jim was a Texas herpetological icon is putting it mildly, as his life's labor of love was even larger than the measure of his Lone Star State. He added significantly to our understanding of herpetofauna and mentored numerous biologists, both professional and nonprofessional that continue that work today. He conducted cosmopolitan research, but spent most of his effort principally on the herpetofaunas of Costa Mesa, California, and from that point on,

Texas, Mexico, and Central and South America. He published over 300 works (Appendix I), as well as describing two new genera of reptiles and over 50 new amphibians and reptiles (Appendix II). Jim mentored 31 doctoral students and 25 Master's students (Table 1), and contributed extensively to countless undergraduates and grade-schoolers. He earned a reputation as one of the most prominent herpetologists of his generation alongside exemplars W. Frank Blair, Roger Conant, Henry S. Fitch, and Hobart M. Smith, just to name a few who have preceded him in death.

Educational and professional career.— Dixon's academic career was remarkable as he earned his B.S. in 1950 with a major in Biology from Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas. His education would have to take a short hiatus, however, because after graduation Jim entered the U.S Marine Corps, serving in the War in Korea (1951-1953), much of which, was in an active combat role. After honorable discharge and upon returning to the U.S. from Korea, Jim was stationed in California where he met his future wife and love of his life, Mary Ellen Finley. They were married in 1953 in

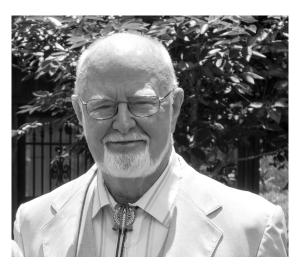


FIGURE 1. Dr. James R. Dixon (age 78 yrs young) in San Marcos, Texas, June 2007. Note the horned lizard bolo tie.

he and Mary were joined at the hip. Jim soon thereafter (1954-1955) accepted a position as the Curator of Reptiles at the Ross Allen Reptile Institute in Silver Springs, Florida, and then entered the wildlife sciences master's program at Texas A&M University (TAMU). Two years later (1957) he earned his M.S. degree and later a Ph.D. (1961) in Zoology from TAMU. His doctoral research topic was on the lizard genus Phyllodactylus. Jim began his academic teaching career as an instructor (1956-1959) in the Veterinary College of TAMU, then gaining an Assistant Professor of Veterinary Medicine position (1959-1961). He then moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, to accept a position as Assistant Professor of Wildlife Management at New Mexico State University (1961-1965) and also served as a consultant to the New Mexico State Game and Fisheries Department. Jim was Curator of Herpetology for the Life Sciences Division at the Los Angeles County Museum in California and an Associate Professor on the faculty of the University of Southern California (1965-1967). He returned to his native state in 1967 to accept a faculty position at TAMU in the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences (DWFS) as an Associate Professor and was promoted to full Professor in 1971. Jim would contribute significantly to research, teaching, and mentorship at TAMU for another 38 years. He took on a role in 1972 as Curator of the Texas Cooperative Wildlife Collection (TCWC), becoming Chief Curator in 1985. Following his formal retirement in 1995, Jim was recognized as Emeritus Professor and Curator. He never really retired because Jim continued his research in adjunct faculty positions, continuing roles as co-investigator on federal projects, committee memberships for graduate students at TAMU and elsewhere, and continued scholarship by publications in journal articles, scholarly books, and larger tomes.

Publications.—While deployed in Korea, Private First Class Dixon published his first scientific paper in 1952 (in Copeia) and remained a creative contributor to the works until his death. Jim has authored and co-authored numerous books, book chapters, and over 300 scholarly articles and notes (Appendix I). From 1955 to 2015, he was an author or co-author of peer-reviewed contributions in every year for 60 years. His mainstream publications are on reptiles (24% on lizards, 37% on snakes) but nearly 20% of all of his contributions investigated wildlife diversity, especially of regional herpetofaunas. His early works were on lizards, particularly gekkonids, with emphasis on snakes growing in his focus over time. He was particularly interested in the Neotropical colubrid snake genus Liophis (Dixon, 1980), with nearly 15% of his published works on snakes related to this challenging and assorted genus.

Contributions to Texas herpetology.—Jim was passionate about helping to stop the indiscriminate killing of rattlesnakes, particularly at rattlesnake roundups in Texas and surrounding states. However, Jim did find a use for biological samples of Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes (Crotalus atrox) obtained from one such roundup (see McAllister et al., 1995) that would have otherwise been destroyed. In addition, he had a

TABLE 1. Graduate students of James R. Dixon, Ph.D. from 1966-1997. *Students who received both the M.S. and Ph.D. under Dixon's direction.

Student	Degree Year	Degree Earned	Student	Degree Year	Degree Earned
Albaugh, D.	1973	Ph.D.	Lavin-Murcio, P.	1996	Ph.D.
Arrizabalaga, M.B.	1993	M.Ag.	Lieb, C.S.	1973	M.S.
Ballinger, R.C.	1972	Ph.D.	Mather, C.M.	1976	Ph.D.
Calvin, T.C.	1974	M.S.	McCrystal, H.K.	1984	M.S.
Camper, J.D.	1990	Ph.D.	McKnight, J.	1996	M.S.
Cohen, R.S.	1984	M.Ag.	Medica, P.A.	1966	M.S.
Cowman, D.F.	1996	M.S.	Michaud, E.	1984	M.S.
Davis, J.T.	1977	Ph.D.	Mora, J.M.	1991	Ph.D.
Dean, R.H.	1984	Ph.D.	Mueller, J.M.	1990	M.S.
Dial, B.E.	1975	M.S.	Olendorf, H.M.	1971	Ph.D.
Fischer, G.W.	1991	Ph.D.	Patton, R.F.	1974	Ph.D.
Foley, D.H.	1994	M.S.	Pelton, R.F.	1974	Ph.D.
Forstner, M.R.J.	1995	Ph.D.	Gallagher, D.H.	1979	Ph.D.
*Rivero-Blanco, C.	1976	M.S.	*Rivero-Blanco, C.	1979	Ph.D.
Greene, B.D.	1993	Ph.D.	Saxon, J.G.	1970	Ph.D.
Grosmaire, E.K.	1977	M.S.	Scudday, J.F.	1971	Ph.D.
Hanks, B.	1993	M.S.	Sites, J.W.	1980	Ph.D.
Hayes, W.	1975	Ph.D.	Stanton, M.A.	1980	M.Ag.
Hayes-Odum, L.	1992	Ph.D.	Steinbach, D.W.	1977	M.S.
Hendricks, F.S.	1975	Ph.D.	Houseal, T.W.	1980	M.S.
*Thomas, R.A.	1974	M.S.	*Thomas, R.A.	1976	Ph.D.
Ibrahaim, A.A.	1997	Ph.D.	Thornton, O.W.	1977	M.S.
Irwin, K.	1997	M.S.	Vaughn. K.R.	1991	Ph.D.
Jaegers, L.W.	1977	M.S.	Whiting, M.J.	1993	M.S.
*Wiest, J.A.	1974	M.S.	*Wiest, J.A.	1978	Ph.D.
Johnson, J.D.	1984	Ph.D.	Wills, F.H.	1977	M.S.
Ketchersid, C.A.	1974	Ph.D.	Yeh, C. F.	1972	Ph.D.
Kofron, C.P.	1980	Ph.D.	Kroll, J.C.	1973	Ph.D.

long and distinguished past of research on the herpetofauna of Texas, most notably four books on their geographic distribution. He updated Raun and Gehlbach's (1972) publication of Texas amphibians and reptiles with his first timely contribution on the subject, published by Texas A&M University Press in 1987 (Dixon, 1978), followed by a second edition in 2000 (Dixon, 2000), and finally a third edition of same in 2013 (Dixon, 2013). In addition, a book on the distribution and ecology of Texas snakes was published with long-time colleague, John E. Werler in 2005 (Werler and Dixon, 2005) by the University of Texas Press. These four books are

considered the gold-standard on modern Texas herpetology.

Funding and research program.—Jim's research program received funding from a range of sources, beginning, in 1957, with an award from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). With this award, he was able to maintain funding as a principal investigator continuously through 2013. Jim was also successful in competitive awards at the federal level from the NIH, National Science Foundation, U.S. Bureau of Mines and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), at the state level from the

Colorado River Municipal Water District and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and funds from international NGO's and private corporations. Beginning in 1949 and continuing until 1994, Jim conducted extensive field studies in Mexico. He also conducted fieldwork in South America from 1968-1993, including the countries of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, French Guiana, Peru, and Venezuela, and in 1978 in four Mesoamerican countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua). Jim reflected on his work (1972-2014) on two federally protected species, the first with the Houston Toad, Bufo [Anaxyrus] houstonensis (Gaston et al., 2001a, b; Jones et al., 2011) as one of the significant examples of integrating field research with the needs of regulatory agencies and collaboration with colleagues in those agencies. The second on the Concho Watersnake (Nerodia paucimaculata) project (Greene et al., 1994, 1999; Whiting et al., 1997, 2008; Forstner et al., 2006; Rodriguez et al. 2012) which yet again provided another example of field research and science discipline contributing to very practical applied management questions while advancing our knowledge of snakes and other animals in those river basins.

Other professional positions.—Jim's characteristic leadership and vigilant statesmanship was acknowledged for over 50 years. In 1961, at the beginning of a career of service to academic societies and other groups, Jim was elected twice President of the Texas Herpetological Society (THS) in 1962 and 1972, having never missed a single meeting! He was also the Class of 1969 member of the Board of Governors (1966-1969), President-Elect (1968), and finally President (1970) of the Southwestern Association of Naturalists (SWAN). Jim retained his service with SWAN even as he moved from academic posts, first in New Mexico, then on to California, and finally to the positions in Texas at TAMU. He served through Volume 15 (2) of 1970 of the

SWAN President Elroy Rice at that summer's meeting. His lifetime contributions to our understanding of the biota of the southwestern U.S. and Mexico was duly recognized by SWAN with his receipt of the W. Frank Blair Eminent Naturalist Award from the Association in 1987, and the Donald W. Tinkle Research Excellence Award in 2004. Jim also served the Society of the Study of Amphibian and Reptiles, Herpetologists League, Texas Academy of Science, North Texas Herpetological Society, and USFWS in various leadership or presidential roles from 1966-1987.

Other distinguished awards.—Jim earned a career long reputation and acknowledgement by the people he served. In 1961 and 1972, he was awarded the Distinguished Research Award by the TAMU Chapter of Sigma Xi-The Scientific Research Society, and voted Professor of the Year in 1972 and 1981. He received the Distinguished Teaching Award from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (which housed the DWFS of TAMU) in 1993, became an honorary Life Member of the THS in 1994, and was recognized as Professor and Curator Emeritus by TAMU in 1995.

Taxa named in his honor.—Jim has been acknowledged by many of his students, colleagues and coauthors in their own research contributions by honoring him in their own descriptions of new taxa. A genus of lizards from Southeast Asia, the Leaf-Toed Geckos (Dixonius) was named in his honor as well as several species of reptiles and amphibians such as the White-lipped Peeping Frog (Eleutherodactylus dixoni, currently E. albolabris), Gray Checkered Whiptail (Cnemidophorus dixoni, currently Aspidoscelis dixoni), Dixon's Leaf-toed Gecko (Phyllodactylus dixoni), and Large-eyed Snake (Thamnodynastes dixoni). In addition, a species of coccidian parasite, Eimeria dixoni was named in his honor by one of us (CTM) (McAllister et al., 1990). Jim also named several species of Southwestern Naturalist, welcoming incoming herpetofauna in honor of his peers, including an

ultimate honor to his wife Mary Ellen, naming a species of snake after her in 1985 (Maryellen's Ground Snake, *Erythrolamprus maryellenae*).

Family.—Doc Dixon was a lot more than the usual herpetological innovator. Throughout his astonishing professional career, he had a strong family-oriented life. With his wife of 61 years, Jim raised five children (two boys, three girls) and their extensive family now includes 11 grandchildren, and 13 great-grandchildren. Dixon's clique expands well beyond this, as many of his students, colleagues, and friends always felt welcome as a part of his extended family. We all have lost not only one of the greatest naturalists and mentors of our time, but a dear friend. Jim was much more than an academic, he taught his students how to turn their ideas into aspirations and how to follow their true passions to build into vocations. He stimulated so many of us, and demonstrated that we can and will continue to do what we are fond of for as long as we possibly can. He will be remembered as always cheerful, outgoing, and supportive. His legacy will continue through the people he stimulated and mentored, each sharing the goal of paying the honored debt of his mentorship forward to our own students and families.

Some final personal comments.—CTM recalls the day in 1989 when he asked Jim if he minded being honored with a new species of parasite that just so happened to be found in the feces of a gekkonid lizard. His answer, which the exact language cannot be included herein for obvious reasons, was typical Jim and made for a good, long chuckle. I'll never forget meeting Jim for the first time at a SWAN meeting way back when. As any naïve graduate student might have been feeling meeting such a famous person, I was uneasy, but after shaking his hand he quickly made me comfortable and accepted like one of the club members. From that point on, his typical greeting was a great "big hug" which made me feel very

special. Indeed, I can think of no better honor befitting of someone when he included my name prominently (to my surprise) on the inside cover of his revised Texas amphibian and reptile book (Dixon, 2000). I am fortunate to have a signed copy that reads, "to my favorite herpetologist", James R. Dixon, 21 April 2000. Indeed, the only regrets I have are that Jim and I published only one paper together (McAllister et al., 1995) and I never was able to accompany him in the field.-I am sure he would have taught me a few things. I will sorely miss Jim-the herpetological community was blessed to have known such a great field biologist and genuine human being.

MRJF came late to the story, being among the last of Doc's doctoral students. Jim Dixon had worked everywhere, had done so much that I wanted to be able to do, and had honed his mentorship (Table 1) on just about all of us by the time I began my work with him. It was my privilege to spend many days of the last two decades in the field with him across Texas (Bailey et al., 2014), Mexico (Gomez et al., 2015), and Ecuador (McCracken et al., 2007). I have never seen another with his raw intuition for exhaustive searches, it may be a born gift, or maybe that depth of experience. He could pick a piece of tin out of a hectare debris field and lift it to find something as rare as a field collected Houston Toad, for us the bags were almost always full. More than his field magic, I was always in awe of the data, field documentation, and his field notes. These are from another era, one without a digital crutch. We were able to evaluate a trend in turtle populations across 30 yr (Brown et al., 2011, 2012) because Doc had the original field pages, and had already known so long ago, recording the effort was the key to successful field biology. From him, I became a more diligent naturalist and effective field biologist, but I also grew to become a mentor and that is a gift beyond measure.

Acknowledgements.—We thank the extraordinary group of people that worked with Jim across his career, the exceptional people that are his family proper, and Jim's own mentors, William

dauf. Together, we all have done more, achieved more, and seen farther than if we had not been part of this illustrious community.

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APPENDIX I

Two-hundred ninety-five publications Texas. Journal of the Helminthological Soci- James R. Dixon. Fifty-seven abstracts and non-technical reports are not included.

1952

001. Dixon, J.R. 1952. A large Bullsnake, Pituophis catenifer sayi, from Texas. Copeia 1952:193.

1955

002. Davis, W.B., and J.R. Dixon. 1955. Notes on Mexican toads of the genus Tomodactylus with the descriptions of two new species.

1956

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1960

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APPENDIX II

Selected genera and species described (1955-

1950-59:

Guerreran Peeping Frog, Eleutherodactylus dilatus. Davis and Dixon, 1955

Great Peeping Frog, Eleutherodactylus grandis. Dixon, 1957

Reticulate Banded Gecko, Coleonyx reticulatus. Davis and Dixon, 1958

Red Peeping Frog, Eleutherodactylus rufescens. Duellman and Dixon, 1959

1960-69:

Duellman's Leaf-toed Pigmy Gecko, Phyllodactylus duellmani. Dixon, 1960

Belize Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus insularis. Dixon, 1960

Rio Marquez Valley Gecko, Phyllodactylus paucituberculatus. Dixon, 1960

Yellow-peppered Salamander, Ambystoma flavipiperatum. Dixon, 1963

Davis' Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus davisi. Dixon, 1964

Peninsula Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus nocticolus. Dixon, 1964

Clawless Geckos, Crenadactylus. Dixon and Kluge, 1964

Nevado de Colima Chirping Frog, Eleutherodactylus nivicolimae. Dixon and Webb, 1966

Angei Island Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus angelensis. Dixon, 1966

Las Animas Island Gecko, Phyllodactylus apricus. Dixon, 1966

CatalinaIsland Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus bugastrolepis. Dixon, 1966

Isla Partida Norte Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus partidus. Dixon, 1966

SantaCruz Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus santacruzensis. Dixon, 1966

Raza Island Leaf-toed Gecko, *Phyllodactylus* tinklei. Dixon, 1966

Honduras Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus palmeus. Dixon, 1968

1970-79:

Narrow Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus angustidigitus. Dixon and Huey, 1970

Cerro Illescas Gecko, Phyllodactylus clinatus. Dixon, 1983 Dixon and Huey, 1970

Andes Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus in- and Kofron, 1984 terandinus. Dixon and Huey, 1970

Rio Huancabamba Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus johnwrighti. Dixon and Huey, 1970

Coastal Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus kofordi. Dixon and Huey, 1970

Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus pumilus. Dixon, 1985 Dixon and Huey, 1970

Lima Leaf-toed Gecko, Phyllodactylus sento- McCrystal and Dixon, 1987 sus. Dixon and Huey, 1970

Peru Clawed Gecko, Pseudogonatodes peruvianus. Huey and Dixon, 1970

Queretaran Desert Spiny Lizard, Sceloporus exsul. Dixon, Ketchersid, and Lieb, 1972

Tanzer's Night Snake, Hypsiglena tanzeri. chaneyi. Liner and Dixon, 1992 Dixon and Lieb, 1972

Southwest Asian Leaf-toed Geckos, Asaccus. Wiest, and Cei, 1993 Dixon and Anderson, 1973.

Dixon's Bachia, Bachia huallagana. Dixon, alis. Dixon, Wiest, and Cei, 1993 1973

Gray-marked Gecko, Asaccus griseonotus. Wilson, Vaughn, and Dixon, 1999 Dixon and Anderson, 1973

Dixon's Anotosaura, Rhachisaurus brachylepis. Dixon, 1974

Vanzolini's Anotosaura, *Anotosaura vanzolinia*. Dixon, 2000 Dixon, 1974

Peru Keelback, Helicops yacu. Rossman and Dixon, 2000 Dixon, 1975

moed and Dixon, 1977

Pyburn's Tropical Forest Snake, Erythrolam- Bryson, Dixon, and Lazcano, 2005 prus pyburni. Markezich and Dixon. 1979

Dixon and Hendricks, 1979

Pernambuco Worm Snake, Typhlops paucisquamus. Dixon and Hendricks, 1979

1980-89:

Gallagher's Kentropyx, Kentropyx vanzoi. Gallagher and Dixon, 1980

Medem's Neusticurus, Neusticurus medemi. Dixon and Lamar, 1981

Ground Snake, Erythrolamprus andinus.

Ground Snake, Liotyphlops argaleus. Dixon

Dixon's Ground Snake, Erythrolamprus atraventer. Dixon and Thomas, 1985

Maryellen's Ground Snake, Erythrolamprus maryellenae. Dixon, 1985

Vanzolini's Ground Snake, Lygophis vanzolinii.

Whiptail Lizard, Cnemidophorus gramivagus.

1990-99:

Cei's Ground Snake, Erythrolamprus ceii. Dixon,

Chaney's Bunchgrass Lizard, Sceloporus

Laurent's Sipo, Chironius laurenti. Dixon,

South American Sipo, Chironius septentrion-

Chiapam Centipede Snake, Tantilla johnsoni.

2000-07:

Ground Snake, Erythrolamprus janaleeae.

Vitt's Ground Snake, Erythrolamprus vitti.

Sierra de Tamaulipas Coralsnake, Micrurus Guyana Bachia, Bachia guianensis. Hoog-tamaulipensis. Lavin-Murcio and Dixon, 2004

Webb's Kingsnake, Lampropeltis webbi.

South American Rain Frog, Pristimantis Basin Worm Snake, Typhlops minuisquamus. waoranii. McCracken, Forstner, and Dixon, 2007



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