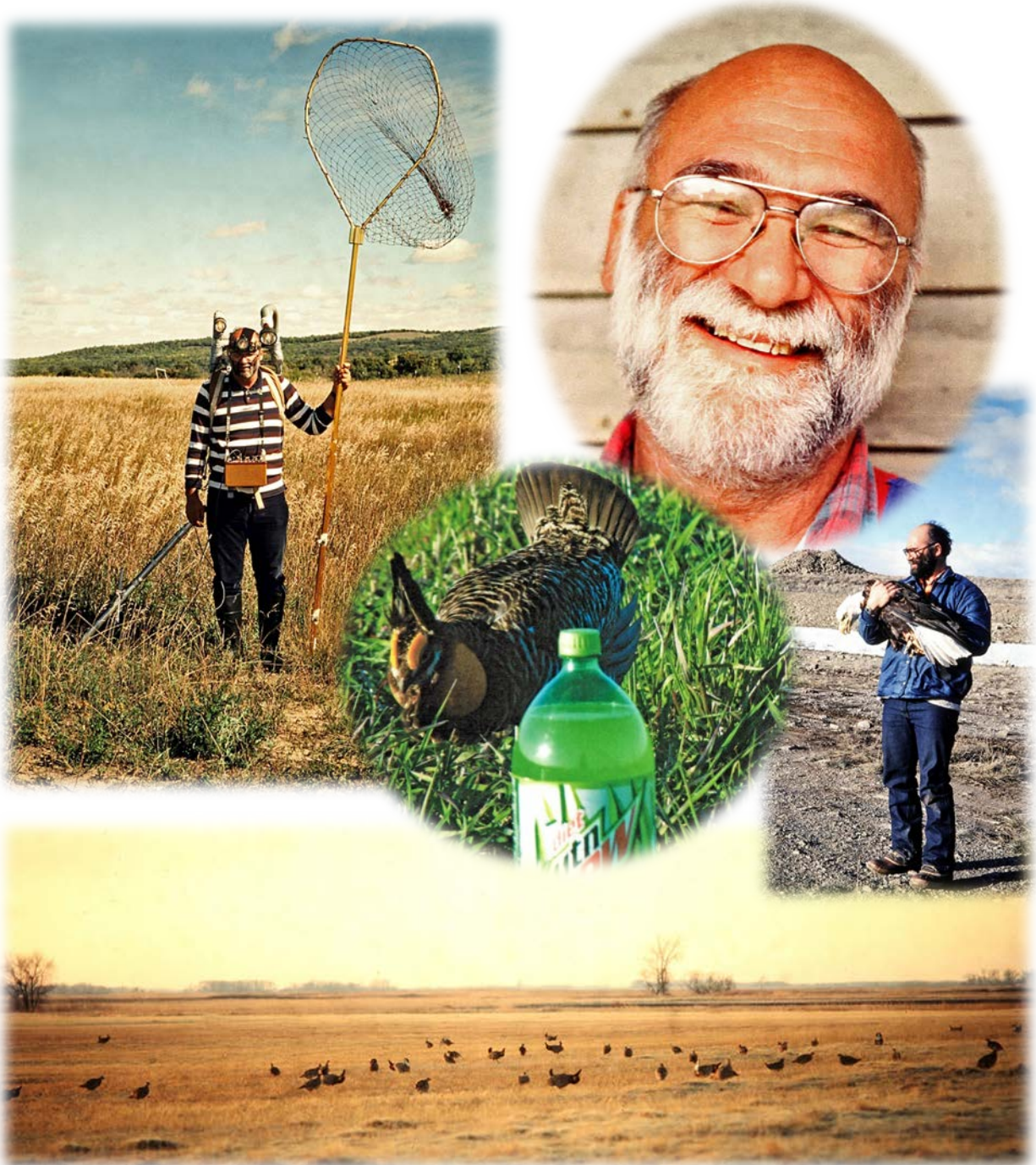


# *Toepfer Stories*

Compiled by Dan Svedarsky, Greg Septon, Lena Larsson, Don Wolfe





**About the cover:** *These are some of John's slide photos that have been digitized – he had over 30,000 slides! Additional photos without legends in this book come from John's slides.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Dan Svedarsky, Greg Septon, Lena Larsson,  
and Don Wolfe*  
Compilers

John Toepfer passed away in the fall of 2018 as a result of complications from hip replacement surgery. John came out of the anesthesia just fine but went into cardiac arrest the second morning while joking with a nurse. John was not known to eat regularly or healthily. And he certainly didn't get regular rest and a decent night's sleep. How he persisted as well as he did should be somewhat of a surprise to those of us who knew the schedule he kept. Many of us wildlifers were attending or returning home from the October 2018 national meeting of The Wildlife Society in Cleveland, OH when we got the surprise news.



Some of us got our heads together and started the discussion as to how to honor this extraordinary guy so here we are. Those of us who are into wildlife and nature are often “characters;” sometimes unconventional, creative, passionate, observant, often driven, occasionally single-minded in purpose, but usually like to have some fun. The latter is perhaps epitomized in one of Svedarsky's favorite quotes by Fred Hamerstrom, a mentor of John's: “*Good works need not be done in a sepulchral atmosphere.*” (Now Fred went to Harvard and Svedarsky grew up in the South where proper English was often a second language, so he had to look up sepulchral when he first heard it!) So, in the spirit of Fred Hamerstrom's admonition to have some fun as we do our work and answer our calling, this booklet is a tribute to a special guy, yes, but also contains a collection of “Toepfer Stories” for those who knew and interacted with John. After reading them, one will not only get a good laugh or two but get a closer look at one of those characters (Did we say occasionally cantankerous?) that we can pick up a reference point or two. Thanks to the many contributors of stories and tributes, and for the financial donations to establish a modest scholarship in John's honor. This is described in more detail elsewhere in this booklet. A huge thanks to the Board of the Sutton Avian Research Center for supporting all sorts of wildlife efforts over the years, this Toepfer project, and for hosting the 33rd biennial Prairie Grouse Technical Council Conference. Other sponsors mentioned herein are gratefully acknowledged.

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## FOREWORD

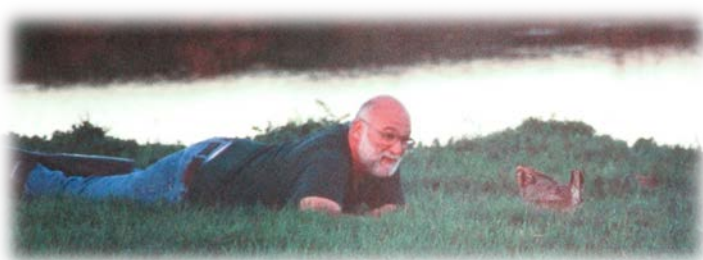
*Greg Septon*

It's not often one comes across an individual with passion, drive, and an independent spirit. And it's likewise not often when that same person devotes his/her life to understanding the natural history of a specific family or single species of wildlife. Names that come to mind would of course include Jane Goodall for her work with chimpanzees and Tom Cade for his work with peregrine falcons. Other names would include George Archibald for his work with cranes and L. David Mech for his lifetime of work studying wolves. Although others came before him and their names are etched in the history of the study of prairie chickens; few, if any, were as keenly focused throughout their entire lifetimes.

A student and dear friend of the Hamerstrom's whose prairie chicken research in Wisconsin saved the species from extirpation in that state, John Toepfer was one of those rare individuals who followed his heart and left the world a better place when he departed.

As part of his Ph.D., John's early work with prairie chickens included an effort to reintroduce pen-reared and wild prairie chickens at Crex Meadows in NW Wisconsin. He also spent over 20 years serving as a Research Consultant with the Society of Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus, Ltd. (STCP). I recall the day STCP inked an agreement with John in the early 1990's to begin unraveling the mysteries behind declining prairie chicken populations in Wisconsin. As John and I sat alone at a table that afternoon while the STCP Council Members were going over finances, John told me that this opportunity was the fulfillment of his life's dream. STCP couldn't have picked anyone better for the job.

Following that day and for nearly a decade, John carried out a STCP research project titled "*Prairie Chickens & Grasslands: 2000 and Beyond*". During the project, John and his crew trapped over 4,600 prairie chickens in seven states – most of which were radio-tagged and tracked to determine daily habits, seasonal movements and nesting success.



His research also included examining factors that had previously received little study. These included studies of genetics, disease, predation, pesticides, parasites nesting success and food.

But one of the least studied aspects of prairie chickens was night roosting. John always lamented the fact that most studies documented daily movements and associated habitat while neglecting nighttime locations - where prairie chickens spend half their lives. To that end I can recall several long nights helping John night-lighting and locating prairie chickens and trapping and radio tagging both adult males and hens with their broods. Suffice to say there are a lot of things a person can trip over in the dark when you're focused on netting a chicken!

In the end, John prepared a lengthy and thorough report on this project that provided detailed recommendations to help insure the long-term survival of prairie chickens in Wisconsin



and elsewhere. In Wisconsin, those recommendations included purchasing or protecting suitable grasslands away from the core management areas to expand the range of the population. His research also documented reduced genetics with Wisconsin's prairie chickens that resulted in the DNR contracting with STCP to have John trap and translocate 40 prairie chicken hens from Minnesota to Wisconsin for release on the Buena Vista Wildlife Area. The goal was to improve the genetics of the Wisconsin birds. History will provide the rest of this story but their range has not been expanded as recommended and for now, the state managed, central Wisconsin grasslands remain the species only stronghold in the state.

Interestingly, between 1973-2000 approximately 2,800 acres of grassland habitat was purchased in Wisconsin - mostly near the core management areas - but the prairie chicken range continued to contract. In 1985, the Wisconsin population was estimated to be 670 cocks. By 2003, this number had gone down to 564. The WDNR spring 2019 Central Wisconsin greater prairie chicken survey counted a mean of only 205 cocks (range 183-230).

In contrast, in Minnesota during the same period, 56,000 acres of grassland habitat was purchased and another 170,000 acres of CRP acres were added. This is the type of land acquisition John had pushed for unsuccessfully in Wisconsin. As a result of the efforts in Minnesota, their prairie chicken range was greatly expanded and the population responded positively growing from 500 cocks in 1985 to 3,200 in 2003 – a six-fold increase. And a permit hunting season was reestablished.

In writing this Foreword I felt it important to tell this story since John always used it as a prime example of what can be done to increase prairie chicken populations when enlightened organizations work together – and what happens when focus is lost and these efforts are not undertaken.

John's last major research project was based in the Sandhills of Nebraska where he studied the year-round ecology of the prairie chicken in the core of the range where populations are associated with large expanses of native grassland habitat. John believed it was ironic that with all



*Memorial service for John Toepfer, April 27, 2019 at the Minnesota Prairie-Chicken Society meeting.  
Photo: Dan Svedarsky*

the research done on the greater prairie chicken, the single dominant question that remained was what is normal? Funding was subsequently approved by STCP for John to carry out what was to be his last major project: “The Nebraska Sandhills 2012-2015: A Focus on the Future”. The goal of this project was to determine all the factors in play that supported a large, healthy prairie chicken population and document what is indeed “normal” so we’d have a detailed account of the elements necessary to recreate this scenario if ever desired in the future.

After the dissolution of STCP in 2015, John moved to Oklahoma where he became the first STCP/Hamerstrom Prairie Grouse Chair at the G. M. Sutton Avian Research Center. There he finished up his field work in Nebraska and assisted with the Center’s new dedicated Attwater’s prairie chicken captive breeding facility.

When it came to prairie chickens, John always saw the larger picture but his focus and determination could also be a detriment when he’d hit a brick wall. For those of us who knew John, we often sensed his frustrations and at the same time admired his resolve to keep moving ahead. John could be cantankerous and crusty and wasn’t always endeared by everyone he met. He could also be a tough and demanding teacher for the many students that worked with him in the field. His belief in the value and importance of fieldwork was something he instilled in all those he worked with and a tradition he believed important to pass on to future field biologists and researchers.

But he was also someone who took a personal interest in others and was a great conversationalist with an infectious smile and a wry sense of humor. One of John’s strengths was his ability to connect with people from all walks of life and all backgrounds. He was equally comfortable leaning on a fence post talking with ranchers as he was sitting at a conference table talking with the group of attorneys on the STCP Council.

For those of us who got to really know him, he became a trusted and lasting friend – the friend you’d call at 3 in the morning knowing he’d do everything in his power to help.

The decades of walking the grasslands and stumbling through rough terrain at night took its toll on John as it would anyone and in October of 2018 he finally went in for a long needed hip replacement. The surgery went well but the following day John went into cardiac arrest and passed on in what was a tremendous and unexpected shock to us all.

John was memorialized in a ceremony in Minnesota this year and his ashes were spread on a very active booming ground by many of his closest friends. And a permanent memorial by the Wisconsin Historical Society has been placed at the kiosk on the Buena Vista Marsh here in Wisconsin where John and the Hamerstroms did much of their prairie chicken research.

In the following pages are memories and stories from those of us fortunate enough to have called John our dear friend.

Muskego, Wisconsin, August 12, 2019



*Greg Septon participating in the spreading of John Toepfer’s ashes out of a Mountain Dew bottle (his favorite drink) on a prairie-chicken booming ground, April 27, 2019*

*Photo: Dan Svedarsky*

## A SPECIAL TRIBUTE TO JOHN (DR. JET)

*Deann De La Ronde*

As it is true for all of us, we are each unique individuals with different callings that we choose to follow as we live out our lives here on this Earth. John's calling centered upon what he would always refer to as the "wildest of wild birds."



*John holding parts of a nest?*

*Photo: Deann De La Ronde*

I feel John to have been the last of three generations of truly in-the-field wildlife researchers here in Wisconsin as far as greater prairie chickens are concerned; the late Dr.'s Frederick and Frances Hamerstrom and Dr. Ray Anderson being the first two. Quite frankly, I always felt John was part prairie chicken himself?! He was most passionate about these birds as his unwavering hours, night and day, in the field only bear testimony to. John's concern was always centered upon the chickens; their safety and welfare always first and foremost in his mind. He went over and beyond the call of duty, time and time again, over and over again with his research. There are very, very few who can touch his work ethics, let alone his personal ethics. John was extremely focused upon furthering his and subsequently 'our own' knowledge and understanding of prairie chickens and their needs in an attempt to ensure their survival in this constantly changing and encroaching world of ours upon theirs.

John had other facets about him and other species he researched, photographed and just outright enjoyed while he was out in the field, for

it was in the field that he was truly in his element and his happiest, unless he was off on one of his fishing trips with one of his buddies.

In my opinion, this World has lost another GREAT in the realm of wildlife researchers who strive to gather facts and live intimately with a species in order to better understand how best to save a particularly endangered animal from extinction. How truly fortunate our natural world was to have had this dynamic, driven thirst for knowledge that John exhibited throughout his life in order to give voice to those creatures which cannot easily speak for themselves.

What follows is my personal story of life and times with a remarkable friend and human being:

John and I were friends for close to 50 years, having met initially in the summer of 1969 at the bustling Hamerstrom "Grand Central West" home in Plainfield, Wisconsin. I spent my summer there illustrating Fran's first of many books, *An Eagle to the Sky*. Throughout that summer, I met many people involved with a variety of wildlife research both in Wisconsin and from all over



the country it seemed. I witnessed how some folks might be ushered out as quickly as they came unexpectedly knocking on the outside door while others might just walk right in with a cheery “Hello.” These visits might easily result in an ensuing little break for warmed up coffee or perhaps a luncheon (with instructions to get in the zip-zip, their little red VW bug, for a run into town to get a specific cut of meat from George the butcher) while conversations again usually revolved around the wildlife and not idle chatter. It was the Hamerstrom “Grand Central West” in full bloom.



*John Toepfer, Fran Hamerstrom, and Ray Anderson. Photo: Deann De La Ronde*

John learned under the best ... the Hamerstroms and Ray Anderson. He always lamented how the true field researcher was becoming a dying breed. Too many people would clock in and out from 8-5, with weekends off, whereas the wildlife had no such clock to sync their hours of activity with ... something the Hamerstroms always felt very strongly about. Mid-day was usually when the wildlife would rest, so this was when we “gabboons” (Fran’s summer field research helpers) would transcribe field notes into her Redbooks and maybe get a short nap in before we went back out for the late afternoon-

evening activity.

I was present when Fran handed their collection of grouse wings over to John. She instructed him to burn them before he ever turned them over to some statistician behind a desk who had never done any field work themselves. I trust these wishes of the Hamerstrom’s and subsequently Toepfer’s, will continue to be honored going forward.

John’s work ethic was solid and his integrity unwavering; both professionally and personally. His birds always came first while John came in last in the overall scheme of things. His passion remained in the field researching the birds; always furthering his knowledge on what it was that these wildest of the wild birds might need to help ensure their survival as a viable population, healthy enough to perhaps withstand some hunting pressure in the years to come.

In the summer of 1972, Fran asked if I would like to head up her Harrier and Kestrel project. After getting to know the Hamerstrom World while living with them that one summer illustrating her Eagle book and subsequent visits thereafter, I jumped at the opportunity. However, the meadow vole population that year was at a very low cycle which the Harrier population then mimicked for we only found 3 nesting pairs that summer. So Fran decided to go after some new data she felt telemetry would afford her which had been difficult to obtain through her other techniques.

The College of Natural Resources at the U of W – Stevens Point lent Fran the needed equipment. We were on a new learning curve regarding the use and attachment of radios on our Harriers. Tom Dunstan, who was an expert on instrumented raptors, was to come up that day we would trap but found he couldn’t so poor John who was only used to radioing his stout prairie chickens definitely had his work cut out for him adjusting our radios upon these sleeker Harriers. I believe John was nibbled a few times by these Harriers during this lengthy attachment process while I held their legs, all the while turning them every which way so John could keep examining

the “fit.” The flight of the Harriers could not be impeded upon their release so the harness fit had to be spot on, which it was.



*John Toepfer and Deann De La Ronde, 1972, radioing the first ever Harrier on the Buena Vista in conjunction with Dr. Frances 'Fran' Hamerstrom's ongoing Harrier Project there.*

John's growing knowledge of telemetry was exceedingly helpful when the radio proved to be quite erratic on our female Harrier. Sometimes we both lost her signal for several days at a time but then John would somehow find her signal again while chasing his chickens around. At summer's end Fran had her new Harrier information which had been eluding her and I had co-authored my first scientific paper; both of us indebted to John for his expertise which he gave most willingly of. I remember how John would log long hours at night, night after night and then be out and about on the marsh the following day, hard at it again, over and over again. John was always given a warm welcome at the Hamerstroms whenever he stopped by for they conferred a lot while John was going to the U of W - Stevens Point. John always prided himself in having escaped being a gaboon while interacting with the Hamerstroms. I can still picture him with his ever-present Mountain Dew, Mellow Yellow or Diet Pepsi in hand, ambling up the path in his rugby shirt, jeans and tall black rubber field boots for a visit to talk chickens. I have such fond memories of sitting around the Hamerstrom's old wooden oval table in their main room, (the “heart beat” of their home as John so aptly coined that table) and whether for meals or coffee, the conversations were always stimulating as they discussed the chickens, the land or some other aspect surrounding the wildlife.

John had the distinction of a select few that could not refrain themselves from tipping back onto two-legs of the less-than-sturdy antique Windsor chairs that surrounded this table. How quickly Fran or Hammy would jump into action whenever someone started to tip.... and if this individual could not refrain, they would immediately be assigned a beat up sturdier oak chair which they could then tip until the cows came home! I recall someone actually falling over backwards onetime! Not sure if they ever tried tipping back upon two legs again after that or not?

John was probably the most generous person I have ever met and on so many levels, too. Whether it was at the end of a long phone call or one of his visits as he was leaving, he would invariably ask if there was anything I needed. I believe he would have given me the shirt off his back in the middle of winter if I ever asked. He was always there for me and often employed my artistic talents whenever he had need of something a bit more special he wished to give someone as a sign of his appreciation for something they had done for him, be it a rancher or a co-worker.



He would also tease me periodically whenever I would call and I'd say "Hey, John...." to which he would reply, "That's Dr. Toepfer...." .... to which I would feign profuse somethings as we then continued forth with our conversation. As I recall some of the things he shared with me over the years I can only say he was certainly one Helluva self-made Man in my book.

In August of 1997, I was asked by Elva (Fran's daughter) if I could come on board as Fran's Artist-in-Residence one last time for Fran kept busting herself out of the local retirement/nursing home Elva had hoped to slip her into since Elva lives in the state of Oregon. I had no second thoughts on this for Fran and I had always meshed well together. John, bless his heart, knew first-hand some of the many challenges I was faced with during this time period. He remained as connected to Fran and I as best he could, often spelling both of us for some badly needed breaks towards the end. We both loved Fran dearly. She ALWAYS delighted in John's visits as they, too, would often drive out to one of the marshes where she and Hammy had spent so much of their lives.

That last trip John took Fran out on in late August of 1998 was per Fran's request to Leola Marsh. Among other things, she talked about how she and Hammy had seen their first chickens there. I came back early that evening to find John standing outside on the passenger side of the van with Fran still sitting inside. He said he had been trying to get her out but she was rather unresponsive and either unable or unwilling to get out of the van and into the house. After much coaxing, we were finally able to help her to the doorway but there she stalled out again, unable or unwilling to lift her feet over the outside door sill while she held onto the door frame. I knew you could get a horse to lift its foot by pinching their fetlock area so I tried this with Fran's ankle. Let's just say I'm glad I was not standing directly behind her foot! We were able to get her inside where she then sat in the chair by the door beneath their old black wall phone for a lengthy amount of time with the "punnies" (a term Fran used when someone was not feeling well). Eventually when



we got her settled onto her bed where she remained sitting on the edge in somewhat of a stupor, John wondered if maybe she had wanted to die out there on her beloved wild marsh where she and Hammy had seen their first chickens for she had not been eager to leave this spot on Leola .... something was there which neither of us could easily dismiss from our minds. As it was, this proved to be her last night in her beloved pre-Civil War home for she passed that second day in a nursing home over in Nekoosa. It was so very hard on the few of us who gathered that night. It seemed numerous phone calls were made then while awaiting other call backs. I was most grateful for John's presence that night of all nights. Fran had wanted so badly to see the northern lights that summer and by God, when Casey Martin came that night, she alerted us that they were glowing above the house! It was the only time I saw them that summer. I only wish Fran could have seen them for at that time she had one foot here and one foot over into the unknown, unable to fully navigate either one. God, how I miss them both. Fran's passing I knew was coming .... John's passing is still surreal.

It was always an honor whenever John might ask me to help him with some aspect of his field work throughout the years, whether it was in Minnesota or here in Wisconsin. I knew it would be a good workout whenever I was to help with trapping for there was always a chicken trap which required some long distance running through plowed wet fields in tall rubber boots for what felt like miles, racing to get birds out and into gunny sacks before they could injure themselves in the traps. Or John might have me go out to an unknown road at o-dark-thirty to listen for chickens .... with him merely saying to watch out for the mud puddles ..... usually an understatement! I definitely learned how to navigate a 4-wheel drive Toyota through some dandy mud holes on very narrow trails through woods. How I prayed not to get stuck! So many were the wonderful adventures with John.



*Otto and Max*

John often dog-sat my two Dachshunds, Max and Otto, after Fran had passed and I stayed on the Hamerstrom premises as guard dog/house-sitter. He eventually ended up with Otto for I saw how they both enjoyed each other's company. I believe John even asked if he might just have Otto? Both dogs had traveled extensively with me so riding shotgun with John was right up their little alleys. One time John forgot Otto out in the field which not until he reached home base did he realize this so back out he raced hoping to still find him in the vicinity where he had last been!

There Otto was out in the middle of nowhere, ambling along the truck trail, probably wondering what the hey happened to his Uncle John?! Otto was an easy keeper so another time John had him, Otto was put on a pretty strict diet only to discover that Otto was supplementing himself with grasshoppers while out in the field .... for Otto's poop contained mainly grasshopper legs and body parts!

At other times while I still had Otto and John would swing in for a visit after Fran had passed, Otto would invariably go over to wherever John was sitting and just sit while staring at him until John would mumble something like "Okay, you little bastard, get up here" for John would then lean over and scoop Otto up and onto his lap. I think Max and Otto were great company for John (and vice-versa) while he was running all over the countryside with his never- ending field work.



There are many other facets to John that I was never witness to which I think is true with everyone who knows anyone. I just know I feel such sadness in my heart with John's passing. Never again will I ever hear his double usage of "is is" or see him ambling up the path for a visit or listen to one of his many lengthy phone calls updating me about some aspect of this or that or any of a multitude of things. I try hard to remember how Fran would not allow herself to wallow in mourning Hammy's passing (I believe she did just that until Ray Anderson had a good talk with her according to John). Fran felt to overly mourn was selfish ... that instead she would be grateful for the many years she and Hammy did share. While it remains difficult for me to fully accept John's passing as I type these words, I WILL hold dear all the many memories I have of this remarkable man who sacrificed so much in his quest for gathering knowledge on how best to proceed to preserve those resources that truly enrich our lives. So many are the memories ALL of



*John Toepfer with passenger in field truck.  
Photo from Deann De La Ronde.*

us are now left with. Dr. John E. Toepfer, whose voice is now forever silenced, joins the ranks of other GREATS, leaving behind what I feel is an impeccable and lasting legacy. I shall forever miss him.

I will end with what Ray Anderson had on his answering machine... "Do what you can for the wild ones and they will respond." ..... and I say .... "Become their voice. For we are all of us animals and what we do to our wild ones, we ultimately do to ourselves."

## REMEMBERING JOHN

*Dan Svedarsky*

I first met John when he showed up at a "Minnesota Prairie Chicken Conference" that a couple of us staged at the Crookston campus of the University of Minnesota in April of 1973. There wasn't much of a focused effort on prairie chickens in the state at that time so we got our heads together, started talking to others, and By Golly, pulled off a chicken get-together to see what needed to be done on their behalf. Early on we reached out to Wisconsin knowing of the monumental work of the Hamerstoms but they weren't available. Wisconsin D.N.R. wildlife manager, John Berkhahn came and brought John with him. I remember John's thick, black beard and his passionate comments at the meeting. (We were later able to line up the Hamerstoms though when we officially launched the "Minnesota Prairie Chicken Society" with our first meeting in Fergus Falls, Minnesota in 1974).

I had been teaching at the Crookston campus since 1969 but didn't have a doctorate. I began a graduate program part-time at the nearby University of North Dakota campus in the fall of 1974; in addition to teaching part-time. Initially, I wasn't clear on what my field research should focus on, but I had a growing interest in the conservation needs of prairie chickens on the local scene. One of my early mentors at the University of Minnesota (St. Paul campus) was Dr. William H. Marshall, who had pioneered attaching transmitters to Ruffed Grouse at the U of MN's Cedar Creek Natural History Area. Radio-telemetry was fairly new when Dr. Robert Robel and his graduate students in the mid-1960s radio-tagged greater prairie chickens in the grassland landscape



Every year John would send out a unique Christmas card, as exemplified by the chicken in flight photo in the cover collage. The lovely photo, taken by Steve Oehlenslager, perhaps suggests that "John has taken flight." John pioneered many field telemetry techniques. He is shown night-lighting chickens but in addition to the receiver, net, battery pack for the headlamp, he would be manipulating a hand-held antenna as well! Try this on a black night in 10-foot high corn or when you stumble onto a roosting covey of Hungarian partridge in the tall grass while sneaking on a radio-tagged chicken. John also loved Toyotas and a sample is shown. After my family and I had put over 350,000 miles on this one and I passed it along to John, he got another 50,000! It was so rusted out when the engine finally froze up that as much dust would come into the cab as was stirred up on the road. (Story is that the water pump had gone out at -20 and John was trying to limp back to the home base in Ada, MN at the time. Not sure where that "carcass" ever wound up.) John is pictured years back when he was giving a field lesson in telemetry to my wildlife students at the University of Minnesota, Crookston. Always generous with his time, he loved to educate, especially students, and he mentored a bunch.

near Kansas State. One of his students was Nova Silvy, whose name needs no introduction in the prairie grouse world. *(As an aside, as a drifting undergraduate student at the University of Missouri, I happened onto a posting of a student chapter TWS meeting in the Student Union. They had a wildlife speaker by the name of Robel who was talking about grouse of Scotland. I went and was inspired by the story of those cool birds that lived in a fascinating country and I guess it stuck.)*

Grady Mann and I made a pilgrimage to the Hamerstrom house in the winter of 1974 when I was recruiting them to come speak at our fledgling prairie chicken group in Minnesota. Their work with the Society of Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus, Ltd, was well known. They spoke highly of John Toepfer. I later got ahold of John and made another trek to Plainfield, WI, stayed with John for a couple of days, and we met with Dr. Ray Anderson (John's advisor). We built chicken transmitters from a spool of insulated wire, a can of powdered dental acrylic (the stuff they make false teeth out of), some small batteries, small transmitters from the AVM company in Illinois, and a Dremel Moto-Tool. I can't remember if we slept; if so, not much. John was generous with his time and passion and we bonded.

John's career was varied and covered a lot of ground, but it started with an undergraduate degree at U-W Stevens Point which led to a Master's degree working with Ray Anderson and Dr.'s Fred and Fran Hamerstrom. He would later receive his doctorate working with Dr. Bob Eng at Montana State University where his thesis would comprise 456 pages! John worked over several states but primarily with prairie grouse in the Midwest and Northern Great Plains. I will rely on others to describe his many involvements over the years which culminated with a staff position at the Sutton Center in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. John received various recognitions in his professional career, but I will note the two which I believe were the most meaningful to him. In 2003, he received The Hamerstrom Award from the Prairie Grouse Technical Council for outstanding contributions in the field of prairie grouse biology. In 2009, he received the Minnesota Award from the Minnesota Chapter of the Wildlife Society. This is the Chapter's highest award and is presented to individuals that have made outstanding contributions to Minnesota's wildlife and natural resources.

I have many fond memories of John as others describe herein; and I too, received the notable late evening phone calls. It seems they came at least after 9:30 at night when I was gearing down to go to bed. Perhaps John had just had a Mountain Dew, or two, but he didn't seem to stop to breathe, very much, in the dialogue. Dang, he had a lot to say! In the "conversation" I would think of some comments but would often forget them when I finally found an opening. I've missed those marathon phone calls and the times when he would sort of run out of things to discuss then say, "So, how has it been going?" It was fun reading the similar experiences of others. John meant well although at times some may not have realized that. And I too, lament the apparent aversion that John sometimes had with keeping up with publishing the essence of his research findings. Sometimes, he seemed almost possessed with collecting data, which as we all know, needs to be brought together in a systematic, timely manner as well as valuing the anecdotal.

Perhaps one of the most enduring parts of John's legacy will be his passion for the resource. Who knows how many people have asked themselves, or others, "How and why is this guy so fired up about all this stuff? If all this is this exciting, then maybe I'd better get fired up too." How



did he manage to keep it up after so many years? What new and important thoughts did John inspire others to have that synergistically led to important interpretations of natural history data and relationships? What observational gems were still in that head when John closed his eyes for the last time?

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## **MEMORIES OF MY FRIEND JOHN**

*Greg Septon*

John Toepfer was my friend and this is not something I say lightly. Like everyone, I'm sure I have my own definition of what a friend is – and an even better definition of what constitutes a good friend. In my definition the words dependable, trustworthy, understanding and considerate come to mind. When one is fortunate enough to have a friend like this for decades, it only strengthens the bond. An additional benefit to having a friend for so long is that over time you get to know each other's successes, failures, and experiences in life which results in a true understanding and appreciation of each other's lives. It also helps when that friend shares common interests and goals. Considering all of this I can truly say John was one of my very best friends. Although there is no



*John Toepfer and Greg Septon hunting quail in Arizona.*

way I could ever cover everything, following are accounts of a few of the many stories and memories that come to mind.

John and I first met in 1978 at Crex Meadows in northwestern Wisconsin where he was involved with a prairie chicken reintroduction project as part of his Ph.D. thesis. And although years would pass before we crossed paths again, when they did we formed a strong friendship. It

was late in 1993 that John was invited to attend a meeting of the Society of *Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus, Ltd.* (STCP) Council. STCP was growing increasingly concerned about the future of the prairie chicken in Wisconsin and we wanted answers as to what needed to be done to ensure their survival in the state. Except for a highly managed remnant population in southern Illinois and the small population remaining in Central Wisconsin, the birds had disappeared from their former range everywhere east of the Mississippi River. After lengthy discussions, the Council asked John if he'd be interested in returning to Wisconsin to look for answers and he said he would. For John, this was truly coming home.

And so began an 10-year, non-traditional research effort that not only included prairie chickens in Wisconsin, but reached across the species' remaining range. In the end, a complete report was published for the STCP Council of Chiefs in 2003 titled: *Prairie Chickens & Grasslands: 2000 and Beyond* (PCG2B). The report identified problems prairie chickens faced in Wisconsin and called for immediate efforts to expand their range in the state through habitat acquisition and initiating a translocation of hens from Minnesota to Wisconsin to increase genetic diversity.

Whenever I could get away, I tried to help John out especially with trapping efforts. I have great memories of night lighting on those muggy, mosquito filled summer nights as we radio tracked hens and netted and radioed their chicks. This gave the saying "cruising for chicks" a whole new meaning. We'd also trap chickens in the winter under drop nets. As chickens returned to bait piles under the nets that had been in place for a week or more, we'd watch and wait until we had a good bunch of birds feeding. Once we did, I'd exit the old Hamerstrom van out of view of the birds, grab the trip line, and pull and run like hell to make sure all the pins holding the net were fully released so it would drop over the chickens. Then came the work. To prevent any injuries, John and I would run to the net and carefully capture and place each chicken into padded holding boxes, load the boxes onto a sled, return to the van and then "process" and radio each bird before releasing them back where they'd been trapped. It was a lot of work in the cold and snow but rewarding when everything played out as planned.

Towards the end of the first year of PCG2B I became a father and a full-time stay at home dad. The year before I'd lost my job at the Museum where I'd spent the previous 26 years so I was in the process of reinventing a way of making a living and raising my daughter.

Although very rewarding in many ways, the one thing missing from caring for a baby full time is "adult conversation" - something I'd always taken for granted in the past but something that was starkly missing in my new world. Well, for those of us who knew John, we also knew that at some point he'd call, the calls could be lengthy, and oftentimes it became an everyday event. At the time I was working with John on STCP research matters, administering grants, editing reports and working through some of the politics so he and I were in regular contact by phone. It was good - we got work done and there was an adult to speak with at times during the day - and it often served as my daily connection with the "outside world."

With John's regular phone calls came an unexpected bonus. One day I was trying to get my 3-month-old daughter Parker down for her nap which was challenging at times. Well in the middle of it all, that day the phone rang and unsurprisingly it was John. Parker was fussy so I placed her in her bassinette, rolled it into my home office and put John on speakerphone. As John and I talked our voices must have merged into background white noise and before long Parker had

fallen fast asleep. For months afterwards, whenever I couldn't get Parker down for her nap I'd roll her bassinet into my office, call John, put him on speakerphone and bingo - in every case it worked!

One of my projects with STCP was creating a website and I worked with John for months making sure the STCP story was fully told and that the details and focus of his research was presented in a general format so that anyone visiting the site would walk away knowing what STCP was all about, what his research entailed and why it was important. Because John was a true field researcher and not focused on publishing for job security as is often the case in academia, he was often chastised for his lack of publications – something that he was unfairly accused of. So, I went back over decades of John's work and pulled out every publication he'd been involved with either as the author or a co-author – a number that totaled nearly 70! I then prepared a complete list of these publications for the STCP website. From that point forward, all John had to do to counter those who felt he hadn't published was to refer them to the website. After a time the false accusations faded into history.

Some of my pleasant memories include the time John, STCP Fellow Dave Halfmann and I drove to Woodward, Oklahoma to attend the Prairie Grouse Technical Council meetings in 2001. To make the most of our travels John decided we should look at prairie chicken habitat on the way to and from Oklahoma. And so we did visiting grasslands in Illinois, Missouri and Oklahoma on our way there, and Kansas, Nebraska and South Dakota on our return trip home to Wisconsin. As always, John shared his vast knowledge of prairie chickens, their habitat and their population declines that had occurred over the years. To drive several thousand miles and see what little remained across what was once all prime chicken habitat was sobering to say the least. Still, to have had the opportunity to hear John tell the story in historical terms was an incredible experience. We also hunted sharp-tails on the Crow Creek Reservation in South Dakota en route home but in spite of a bumper crop of snowberries, we never saw a grouse.

Another memory is from back in January of 2004 when as a “reward” for months of writing and finally completing the PCG2B



*John Toepfer and dachshund Otto.  
Photo: Greg Septon*

still a nice little dog...

report, John and I went on a mid-winter bird hunting trip. I had brought along my Wire-haired Pointing Griffon “Briar” and John too brought along a dog. John had been dog sitting an aged, long-haired dachshund named “Otto” for some time. Although Briar rode comfortably in her kennel in the back of my 4-Runner, Otto rode first class - up front, curled up in John's coat on the floor – just in line with the warm air coming from the heater. Long story short – Otto was in bad, bad need of a bath – for the entire trip - and at times it was just better to turn off the heat, crack the window and be cold rather than to have to smell him! But he was

The first leg of the trip found us on the Cimarron National Grasslands in southwest Kansas where we met up with long-time friends Gary Huschle and Dave Trauba who had driven in from Minnesota. Our quarry was lesser prairie chickens – in my opinion, the classiest game bird of all. After three days of long walks through the sand sage landscape, Gary and I had each taken a bird and we'd seen maybe 100 more – mostly at a distance. John was not a bird hunter but he carried a shotgun and took a few long shots to be part of the effort. He was just happy to be there with kindred spirits and take measurements from the two birds we'd shot.

From Kansas, John & I headed to Arizona to hunt Mearns' quail in the Santa Rita Mountains near Patagonia. Although John didn't have many shooting opportunities, on a somewhat open hillside one afternoon he had a clear shot at a quail and dropped it with one (very lucky) shot. For John who was legally blind in one eye this was a pretty amazing feat.

During what was John's last major research project in the Sandhills of Nebraska, I had an old friend come to visit from the Netherlands and during his stay we drove to Nebraska to hunt prairie chickens. Ysbrand Brouwers, who is President of the Artist's for Nature Foundation had hunted all across Europe but had never seen a prairie chicken let alone had the opportunity to hunt them. Ysbrand & I stayed with John at the house he based his research from in the middle of the Sandhills south of Bassett and the next day we met up with Bill Vodehnal. As a biologist with the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, Bill has worked with prairie chickens for decades and on our first day hunting with him, Ysbrand scored a double on prairie chickens!

There was also the time John and I were at the Annual STCP Bash, at one time "the" social event of the year in Milwaukee – always held the first week of December. That particular year we had a tremendous snowstorm hit hard just prior to the Bash and by the time the party was over there was close to a foot of snow on the ground. As we looked at the swirling snow through the windows at the Wisconsin Club, all we saw were stuck cars everywhere with tires spinning. The parking lot was a mess and John looked at me and said – "Let's go help out." Now neither John nor I were ever much for sports coats, ties, dress slacks & shoes which we'd worn to the Bash. Nevertheless we put on our coats and began pushing cars and coordinating their exits onto Wisconsin Ave. We ended up soaked and exhausted but John was pleased that we'd made things better and were able to help folks get home that night.

Until you got to know John, he could be a bit crusty and seemingly hard to get along with. But once that crusty exterior began to chip away you soon realized there was someone inside who really cared about prairie chickens and likewise also cared about people. John always went out of his way to help anyone in need and as others have also said, he always ended his phone calls with the words "let me know if you need anything" – and he meant it.

In 2003, the Prairie Grouse Technical Council awarded John the Hamerstrom Award for outstanding contributions in the field of prairie grouse biology. However, when it came time for him to receive the award he was nowhere to be found. John told me the reason he left the meetings & wasn't there to receive the award was because he felt he would have started crying and he didn't want anyone to see that. Being away night lighting was an excuse no one would ever doubt and that's been the story that covered his self-imposed absence that night - until now. The Hamerstroms were some of the most important and influential people in his life and he deeply cared for them and what they were all about. Because of that special connection, receiving the Hamerstrom Award



meant as much (or more) to John than receiving his Ph.D. That deep-seated passion was interwoven in all he did – it’s just that not everyone got to see it.

It’s going on a year now since John’s passing and as I write this there are still times when the phone rings and for a brief passing second - I expect it to be him.

Having had a friend like John for decades was a true gift in life and something I’ve never taken for granted. For those of us who were in his small circle of friends, there will forever be a void in our lives – John was indeed our friend in the truest sense of the word.

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## **JOHN TOEPFER – COLLEAGUE, MENTOR, CRITIC, SUPPORTER, FRIEND**

*Don Wolfe*

Sutton Avian Research Center

In 1996, as the Sutton Avian Research Center first started conducting research on greater prairie-chickens, I was seeking information on the best telemetry equipment and methods, how to trap prairie-chickens, what morphometric data should be gathered, etc., and was repeatedly referred to John Toepfer. During my first conversation with John, he seemed somewhat aloof at first, and said that I needed to get a copy of his dissertation, as it would have all my answers. It was almost as if he was constantly receiving requests for information (which I later confirmed), but then proceeded to oblige me. Over the following months and years, as I had further questions, I would call, and John would willingly answer,

but I could count on his answers lasting one to two hours. To say that he was a huge help and influence would be a gross understatement. Although I didn’t fully comprehend it at the time, it turned out that the more I pestered him, the more he indulged me. Indeed, I am sure that my repeated queries earned his respect and support. Years later, as he was assisting me while trapping lesser prairie chickens, he commented “For over 30 years, every time someone started a research



*John on field trip at the International Grouse Symposium, Iceland, 2015. Photo: Don Wolfe*

project on prairie grouse, they came to me for advice, which I freely gave, but then they typically went out and did their own thing anyway. You listened and followed my advice, and improved upon it.” Through the years, John was always my biggest critic, but also my biggest supporter, and we developed a friendship that went beyond the common thread of being prairie chicken enthusiasts.

John was and still is a mentor to me and dozens of others. He always emphasized the importance of tracking males, as well as tracking all birds at night and through the winter, and was often critical of narrow focused research (only hens, only daytime, only summer, etc.). He would often say that the two things most studies fail to consider but are of great importance are “where do they sleep and what do they eat?” Another phrase I heard from him repeatedly was “more grass leads to more grouse”, but he also emphasized that their habitat should not be strictly grass, but also shrubs and forbs, especially the larger forbs that he often called “pseudo-shrubs.” Unfortunately, the providential knowledge can no longer be accessed or downloaded from his hard-drive, a loss felt now by all current grouse researchers, and an even greater loss to those future grouse biologists and enthusiasts that will never have the opportunity to know him personally and glean those valuable tidbits of information.



*John doing office work. Shown here at the field office in Nebraska. Photo: Greg Septon*

In his later years, with the dissolution of the Society for Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus (STCP), John joined the Sutton Avian Research Center as the STCP/Hamerstrom Prairie Grouse Research Chair. After 40+ years of field research in at least six different states, essentially living the vagabond lifestyle, this position would allow him to focus more on writing up results of his decades of research. But the allure of fieldwork continued, and he still found ways to get out of the office on a fairly regular basis, even as his health was failing. Whenever new interns came to the Sutton Center, John would have them come sit and listen to him for several hours, while also asking thought-provoking questions of the intern. These sessions may be somewhat likened to a thesis defense, and the intern afterward left with a tremendous amount of new knowledge, but more importantly, a humbling realization of how much they did not know. For me, my most

cherished memories are of John's daily stops in my office, many of which lasted two or more hours. Although these talks almost always started with sports or politics, grouse or quail always found a way into the conversation. Productivity may have suffered, but the knowledge gained and shared by both was immeasurable.

Like his predecessors, Fran and Frederick Hamerstrom, and Aldo Leopold, John always appreciated the intrinsic value of grouse and all other wildlife. I think his view parallels the following paragraph from Leopold:

*"The physics of beauty is one department of natural science still in the Dark Ages. Not even the manipulators of bent space have tried to solve its equations. Everyone knows, for example, that the autumn landscape in the north woods is the land, plus a red maple, plus a ruffed grouse. In terms of conventional physics, the grouse represents only a millionth of either the mass or the energy of an acre. Yet subtract the grouse and the whole thing is dead. An enormous amount of some kind of motive power has been lost."* (A Sand County Almanac, p. 137)

Of course, John would probably rephrase it this way: *"The physics of beauty is one department of natural science still in the Dark Ages. Not even the manipulators of bent space have tried to solve its equations. Everyone knows, for example, that the autumn landscape in the Midwest prairie is the land, plus a goldenrod, plus a prairie-chicken. In terms of conventional physics, the prairie-chicken represents only a millionth of either the mass or the energy of an acre. Yet subtract the grouse and the whole thing is dead. An enormous amount of some kind of motive power has been lost."*

In addition to being a colleague and mentor, John was also a friend and encourager. When my oldest daughter (now 23 years old) was still a toddler, he stayed at my house a couple of nights. He told me then (and other times) that it was rare to see a person who is both a good biologist and good parent. He often said, maybe not in these exact words, be the best parent you can be, and let everything else work itself out. While it may seem odd for parenting advice to come from a person that was never married or a parent, it also reflects on John's viewpoint on parenting, as he chose to stay single because he felt he could not be the best spouse or parent with his chosen lifestyle and calling. Over the years, he always asked how the family was, and I know it was a sincere question and not just a formality. As many of John's friends know, he would always be willing to assist with anything, whether work-related or personal. I will wrap this up by saying that I hope John knew how honored I felt and how much I appreciated his advice, support, and friendship.

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## **THE FOREMOST EXPERT ON GREATER PRAIRIE-CHICKENS IS NO LONGER WITH US - DR. JOHN E. TOEPFER 1948-2018**

*The Sutton Newsletter 51:4-5*

**Lena Larsson:** It was a punch in our hearts when John's heart stopped working two days after hip surgery. Although John often used to joke about his passing, we really thought that there would be many more years of him sharing his incredible knowledge about everything related to prairie-chickens. I know of no other person that has spent as much time in the field researching prairie grouse as John. He lived and breathed prairie-chickens. There was no lack of stories, and John was a true researcher who never stopped asking questions. He left behind a treasure trove of data, specimens, over 20,000 slides, photos, videos, field notebooks, transmitters, the Hamerstrom van, and... the list goes on.

Now, John was adamant that to be qualified to analyze field data, you must have been in the field yourself. He also did not have high regards for geneticists, which is a category that I



belong to. But we got along well since we share a love for the birds and for the prairie. John was a great mentor and inspired many more people than we know. He always offered to help in whatever capacity needed, even when his health was deteriorating. John used to be an athlete, and he possessed unbounding energy, to the extent that he could wear out the hardest.

John worked as a field technician for, and became close friends with Fran and Frederick (Hammy) Hamerstrom, who in turn had been students of Aldo Leopold. Before Fran passed away, she asked John to take care of all their data. Otherwise burn it. He kept it. He also kept his graduate advisor Dr. Ray Anderson's research collection. These valuable and irreplaceable resources are now stored in four places here at the Center. John left us the task of organizing this. We will be grateful to all who can help. First it will be physical; second it will be sorting; then it will be digitizing; finally, there have to be some special minds with field knowledge for analyses. The goal is to create a special grouse repository, a dream of many biologists and conservationists, including John. John, we want to honor your memory and legacy with all our abilities!

**Bonnie Gibson:** In my career I have had the opportunity to work with a wide assortment of birds and other animals. I can honestly say that prairie-chickens are a unique and challenging species that have completely humbled me. Until working with these birds, I did not realize how much there still is for me to learn.

When getting to know John, it only took a couple of days for me to realize that the depth of his knowledge about prairie-chickens was unlike that of any other person I have ever encountered. I very quickly became dependent on John to help answer my many questions about behaviors, health, breeding, radio collars, and tracking. There was not a single day that went by that we did not speak. Even on



*Greater prairie-chicken health checkup at Sutton Center August 2018.*

*Photo: Lena Larsson*

my weekends he would call me to chat. Of course with John, the conversation is all prairie-chickens all the time. He did not understand my desire for a day off from talking "birds," and would often tease me for suggesting that I needed such a thing. Today I am grateful for every second of those conversations with the man who became my biggest mentor.

On the afternoon before his passing, I called John at the hospital to check in, and to make sure he was planning to eat some dinner (John was notorious for skipping several meals a day). After we spoke, I contacted the nurses' station on his floor to see if it would be ok for me to send

him a pizza. They loved the idea. That night I had a meat lover's pizza and a Mountain Dew, his very favorite drink, delivered to John's hospital room. If you know John at all, you know there was rarely a moment when he did not have a Mountain Dew in hand! In hindsight I am so grateful I decided to send him some dinner, which ended up being his last meal. His passing was a huge shock, and a massive loss for all of us. In his wake he left behind a lifetime's worth of data and research that will live on as his legacy. In this way he can continue to be my mentor, and can continue teaching us all about the birds to which he dedicated his life.



*John and Steve Sherrod putting transmitters on greater prairie-chickens at Sutton Center August 2017.*

*Photo: Lena Larsson*

**Steve Sherrod:** I first met John sometime in the 1990's when seeking advice about the most effective way to trap greater prairie-chickens for a research project here in Oklahoma. From the get-go, he was friendly, helpful, and chock-full of positive energy. We both became members of the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken Recovery Team in 2000, and this resulted in a lot of enjoyable discussions/debates about grouse related topics and ideas. There was no one more dedicated to prairie-chickens than John, and I can only believe that he counted greater prairie-chickens rather than sheep in his sleep. He often stayed up all night recapturing chickens, sometimes alone, spotlighting so that batteries or

transmitters could be replaced. Once on the return trip to Oklahoma from Nebraska, John was awakened by a truck driver tapping on John's pickup window. John had fallen sound asleep at 3AM at a stop sign in a small town. And then there was the time when John and field tech Brandon Gibson were tracking prairie-chickens at night and rolled their Datsun pickup off a sand dune bluff, neither being too worse for wear.

I would introduce John as the person in North America most knowledgeable about greater prairie-chickens, and if you were going to talk to John at all, be prepared, because you were going to talk about prairie-chickens, and John would do most of the talking (I say with a smile). Of course he was interested in other things too including basketball (he had been on the state champion high school team, plus he became a passionate Oklahoma City Thunder fan), fishing (he loved to catch fish but refused to eat them), football (the Packers forever!), and baseball (Dodgers!!! so he would have been disappointed in the recent Series plus the 30 years prior.) That means you would have no problem conversing with John as long as you discussed prairie-chickens, basketball, prairie-chickens, fishing, prairie-chickens, the Packers, prairie-chickens, the Dodgers, and prairie-chickens ad infinitum.



After joining the Sutton Center staff as the Society for Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus/Hamerstrom Prairie Grouse Research Chair, John and I usually ate dinner together 2–3 times/week. Some of that time was spent trading jokes at each other's expense. John always had a twinkle in his eye and a ready chuckle to accompany his latest joke. There are many who grieve deeply, as do we, about the departure from this world of this kind soul. However, you can bet that if there are prairie-chickens in heaven, John will be riding across the clouds in an old beat up Datsun pickup with an extended antenna and a smile on his face, tracking them.



*John in his silver Datsun, Nebraska 2015.*

*Photo: Steve Sherrod*

## ADDENDUM

*Bonnie Gibson*

After John's passing, I was asked to assist with cleaning out his apartment. If you knew John at all, you will already know what a massive undertaking this was. His apartment was overflowing with carousels of slides (over 30,000 slides as it turns out), bins of research on prairie chickens and other species stacked from the floor to the ceiling, and a computer from every decade of his life.

I found some very bizarre things amidst his possessions, no doubt. In his tiny kitchen, stood three deep chest freezers filled to the brim with dead birds, blood vials, AND his frozen dinners. In a bin of office supplies, I discovered two of his molars... at least I hope they were his! The thing that made me laugh the most, wasn't discovered until after his apartment was completely cleared out.



*Bonnie Gibson watches John arranging prairie-chickens getting transferred to release pens 31 August 2018. Photo: Lena Larsson*

John's brother Paul helped us transfer the last of the research papers and slide carousels to a storage container at the Sutton Center HQ. Paul was driving John's car that day, and unloading all of its contents. In the trunk of the car, Paul found a beat up old red toolbox overflowing with

radio collars and banding equipment. He handed me the tool box, knowing I had been on the hunt for some missing radio collars, and told me to just keep the box and all of its contents. This box had seen better days, and was likely his go-to banding kit when in the field.

Later that day I brought the box back to my office to go through. As I dug around, unpacking its contents, I found something that seemed very out of place. Underneath a dusty bag of radio collars, sat a small blue velvet box. When I opened the box, I discovered a tiny silver urn. I called Paul immediately to tell him what I had found. After describing the urn and the box, Paul said. “Oooh, that’s our aunt Betty!”

Was she an adventure seeker? Was she interested in wildlife? Why else in the world would she be kept in the trunk of John’s car? After returning aunt Betty to Paul, he told me a little bit about her. She was a woman of high class, Paul said. “Aunt Betty was always in heels, and never without her pearls.” This made us both laugh. I am sure poor aunt Betty tagged along with John on countless adventures over the years, whether she liked it or not!

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## MEMORIES OF JOHN

*Lena Larsson*

Executive Director, Sutton Avian Research Center

I first met John as a field technician in 1998 when he came to inspect the trap set-up we had on a booming ground in Osage County, Oklahoma. Apparently Don was such a bug in his ear with a thousand questions, so I don’t know if John was on the way to somewhere else, or if he just made the trip to share his expertise. John seemed to be no stranger to traveling long distances without extensive planning.

After I gave a presentation on lesser prairie-chicken genetic effective population sizes at the Prairie Grouse Technical Council in Hays 2011, John made a remark that the genetics are not really important since there are so many other concerns to keep birds alive. All that theory makes population genetics a very complicated subject, and it is not easy to impress an “old school” field researcher when talking allele frequencies, heterozygosities, and inbreeding coefficients. But it was classic John, poking presenters with questions that really could be all-day discussions!

John was supposed to wrap up his Nebraska field work in 2015, and he officially became the Sutton Center STCP/Hamerstrom Prairie Grouse Chair in June of that year. We went up to his field site to collect greater prairie-chicken eggs to start a captive breeding flock for practicing methods. The collection went smoothly, John took us to three nests, and we even had time to stop



*John Toepfer and Lena Larsson in Nebraska 2015.*

*Photo: Steve Sherrod*



and chat with Bill Vodehnal. John asked if we could help bring a Ford Ranger back from the shop to the Seier house, after some repairs on the transmission. Sure, I follow after John in his silver Datsun with the huge antenna on the roof; he is driving 70mph, pointing at signs about locals not wanting the Keystone XL pipeline or something along the way. When it was time to slow down, I realize that it was just about impossible to shift. Making a 90° turn on a road of sand in 4<sup>th</sup> gear was a new experience, but I made it to the house... (John later donated that vehicle to my spouse, actually kids, but that is another story.)

Getting John out of the field took some time (and never completely), but he finally moved down to Oklahoma late 2016. He was such a great resource for us, helping with everything from prairie-chicken husbandry, to reports, releases, training techs in tracking, and always coming up with ideas on how to solve problems. He regularly came to my office to hang out and chat; I still expect him to come around the corner.

I asked John to “farm sit” when going overseas in 2017. No problem, but John warned me that he had taken care of someone’s soul mate dog one time and it died. He froze the dog, so that his friend could have some closure. Well, our dogs seemed healthy enough, so hopefully not too much would go wrong. John actually drove the Hamerstrom van down to the farm so we could show him around. It may have been the last ~40 mile trip driven with the van? John had an extra charged car battery, which he changed out to get back up to Bartlesville. (The Hamerstrom van is presently parked at the Sutton Center, but no one has volunteered to drive it down the switchback yet, wonder why?)

So, farm sitting... John has a goat. Her name is Emma and she was born the day before we left. The two of them bonded and she would recognize John instantly to this day. Another one who will never forget John is the cat Pothole. (Pothole was found in a pothole on Main Street in Barnsdall, Osage County.) Pothole is very hesitant around strangers. It didn’t help that our guardian Pyrenees dog had become a porch potato, and a local raccoon figured out a way to get into the chicken run. John set up a trap and he caught... Pothole. John never saw the cat for the rest of the time he was farm sitting. But Pothole was alive and well. A few months later, John came for a visit, and there was Pothole on the porch. He heard/saw John and took off like someone burned his tail.

Oh John, we miss you. We commemorated you with a prairie-chicken meal that Dan cooked to perfection for the Sutton Center Christmas party. These were birds that you collected livers from at a hunting station in Nebraska September 2018, so we could compare nutrient levels with captive raised individuals. Bonnie never did get a chance to buy you those suspenders – you said you would snap them too much, and belts just don’t



*Dan Reinking preparing prairie-chicken in honor of John, December 2018. Photo: Lena Larsson*

fit. You used to joke about dying in the field, and to just kick some dirt over you. I at least, and maybe you too, expected that you would be around a lot longer. However, you got to go quickly, and that can be something to be thankful about in some ways. John, thank you for the time we shared. You were a very special person with a big heart.

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## TOEPFER MEMORIES

*Dan Lipp*

Sutton Avian Research Center Field Technician, Nebraska Sandhills, September 2017-March 2018.

Having worked a dozen ornithological field positions over the years and answering to numerous bosses, I think John Toepfer will always remain a standout in my mind.

My first outing with him involved tracking a tagged prairie chicken to its nighttime roost in hopes of finding a flock. We managed to locate them and began creeping in their direction in order to capture and tag previously uncaught birds. We inadvertently flushed the bunch, but John, undeterred, deftly reached his massive salmon net out as far as it would go and corralled the nearest bird before gently lowering it. “That was dumb. That was stupid. Don’t ever do that!” he admonished himself in front of us. He explained afterward that taking a bird on the wing was not the safest capture technique and that he didn’t want us repeating what he just did, but he did it with such finesse that I couldn’t help but think that he had been developing his netting skills for some time, and the bird wound up being just fine. Not bad for a guy who was blind in one eye.

Another thing that stuck out to me was the state of our field vehicles. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen insurgents in war-torn countries driving nicer pickups on the nightly news. However, John had modified them to raise an antenna well above what we could achieve on foot, and thus pick up signals farther away without leaving the truck. In retrospect, it was a pretty ingenious upgrade, and if I didn’t think he was dedicated to getting good data before, I sure did then.

When I went out with John, there was no telling what time we’d return. If there was a



*Dan Lipp, John Toepfer, and Brandon Gibson while night lighting  
September 2017. Photo: Steve Sherrod*

radio turning on in three hours and we had nothing else to do, he would often prefer to sleep in the work truck until the transmitter came back on when we were free to resume our tracking. John had

a supernatural ability to fall asleep at the drop of a hat. His snoring usually ensured that I never did.

I learned to drive a manual transmission when John wanted to sleep one particular day. We were about to return home from the field and John told me he really needed to sleep. I hadn't driven a stick at this point, so I let him know that I probably wasn't proficient enough to take us home. He said something like "Oh, bull" and gave me a quick tutorial on the basics. I eased us out of a pasture under his supervision, and when we got to the highway, he told me "Ok, I think you've got it from here" and promptly fell asleep in the passenger seat. It was a bit of a trial by fire, but with minimal gear grinding, I got us home. Driving the trucks gradually became second nature after that, but the laissez faire introduction John gave me is what really got me started.

Over my next few months in Nebraska, John would check in periodically and was never short on information on the habits of grouse and prairie chickens. He was a walking archive of prairie chicken knowledge, and he could, and would, talk unabated about their life history, habits, population trends, and literally everything relating to them. If prairie chickens could have a favorite movie, John could tell you what it was and why. His passion for the project was unrivalled, and I think it made us more interested. He was a one-of-a-kind boss who was genuinely concerned with our welfare and our understanding of the data we were generating, and I count myself as very fortunate to have crossed paths with him.

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## RAMBO

*Bill Vodehnal*

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Bassett



*Rick Baydack, Bill Vodehnal, Willard Heck, and John Toepfer at meeting. Photo: Jen Ruch*

dilapidated Toyota pickups were constantly in for repairs at Tucker Iverson's Main Street Auto shop in Bassett. I could only imagine how many times my doorbell would ring. To my surprise, John wasn't much of a nuisance at all and usually stopped by only to visit or when he really needed my help. I will say that on several occasions, I was called very late at night or at wee hours of a

John thoroughly enjoyed his stay in Nebraska studying greater prairie-chickens in their vast grassland home called the Sandhills. When I agreed to initially get him started with his research south of Bassett, I thought to myself that this might be a mistake as John would be banging on my door about every day seeking assistance of sorts. It was common knowledge from the 35 plus years that I've known him that he had worn out equipment and was usually short on help in the field. Nobody wanted to work his 20-hour days, 365 days a year. His

Sunday morning by John to come pull him out as he was stuck in the middle of a blowout while trying to nightlight. I was always the first one he called.

A couple of years ago, John contacted me on a December winter day when he needed to collect a couple of male prairie-chickens for genetic sampling and mail the birds on dry ice the same day or shortly thereafter. He knew where birds were hanging out in winter concentrations on ranches with feedlots and/or corn fields, thus this might be an easy task for him to complete. I said I had a sweet Remington Model 24, .22-caliber short rifle with open sights that was really accurate at 50-75 yards that he could use. I could sense from the skeptical look on his face that he was doubtful, but he took my rifle and was on his way. Three days later, John came back and was going to give my rifle back. I asked how it went and he evaded the question. It dawned on me that John never fired the rifle and didn't feel comfortable shooting guns. I never knew him to be a hunter. I asked if he needed some help and his face lit up "yes" which is what he wanted me to do in the first place. So, the next morning, a blustery cold winter morning, we headed south to Allen Sybrant's ranch where he feeds cattle in bunks every morning. John knew the time the birds would arrive. As we drove through Allen's yard to get to the feedlot, John said "Hey look, there's Rambo." It was obvious that John had spent a lot of time with Rambo as he spent lots of time visiting with ranchers about chickens and his project which is why he became known as the "chicken man" in the county. Rambo was a big mutt that looked like he had some St. Bernard in his gene pool. John and I proceeded through the gate to the feed bunks to wait for the chickens to arrive and hopefully, get the job done before the cows arrived. John, still skeptical that this would work said he needs a male, but I couldn't shoot his radioed birds. Well, how on earth am I going to identify a chicken who has a radio or not? He advised he would glass and tell me which one to shoot. Sure enough, after about 15 minutes of sitting, the birds flew in and landed about 75 yards out and began walking towards the bunks. Thus, John started glassing and found a male he wanted me to shoot and guided me as to which one was at about 60 yards. I asked if it had a radio and he didn't think so. I laid my rifle out the window, sighted on the bird, and squeezed the trigger. I missed low. I took aim once again, squeezed the trigger again, and the bird flopped to the ground. John was ecstatic. And then he blurted out "Oh shit (plus a few more expletives), Rambo!" Unbeknownst to us, Rambo had followed us from the yard and sat next to the pickup watching the birds and cows come in. Rambo spotted the flopping bird and was on the dead run to retrieve, except he didn't retrieve to us as he took the bird and was on the dead run to the house. John yelled at me, cussing a blue streak, to catch up with Rambo as we can't have his saliva all over the bird as it will contaminate the sample. Bouncing across the frozen cow pies, the pickup almost caught up with Rambo, but we ran into the closed gate. All I could think to do was bale out of the pickup and yell "Rambo, fetch." Rambo turned and came near me and dropped the bird. John took a sigh of relief and wondered how I knew to yell "Fetch." I said I guessed they might have played fetch with their dog. We were then able to get Rambo back to the house and collect another male for John in the next hour.

John had driven the Hamerstrom van to Sybrant's the night before to work the birds with his usual body, feather, head, wing, and leg measurements for data measurements prior to shipping. This is usually an hour excursion per bird for John unless he has company which takes about 2 hours as he has many stories to tell and messages to convince my way of thinking. It was an inspiring morning for me to sit inside the Hamerstrom van knowing all the historical prairie-chicken knowledge that had been gathered there. I couldn't refrain from telling John that Fred and Fran are probably rolling over in their graves and would be totally upset with how he took care of



their van. There was no heat and the inside of the van was a pig sty. I won't repeat John's response back to me.

The mission was accomplished and John sincerely appreciated my assistance with this collection.

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## HOW I MET DR. JOHN OR TRAPPING SHARPTAILS AT FORT BERTHOLD

*Gary Huschle*

Leonard, MN

In 1987, I moved to Devils Lake, ND and was working at the Devils Lake Wetland Management Office of the Fish and Wildlife Service. In April of 1988, a bald-headed man with thick glasses walked into the office and started down the row of offices visiting with other employees that he knew. He eventually stuck his head into my office and said "who the hell are you" and introduced himself as John Toepfer, a professor out at Little Hoop Community College. Well, this conversation ended a couple hours later with an invite to go trap sharp-tailed grouse with him at Ft. Berthold Reservation where he was conducting a telemetry study.

The next Friday night he picked me up after work in a beat up old sedan with a heater that didn't work too well and off we went to Ft. Berthold Reservation. Four hours later we arrived at a shady looking motel in New Town and John checked in and got a key. I was ready for bed but instead we climbed into a more beat up old Toyota pickup that was parked out back with an equally poor heater and an antenna sticking out the top. We drove around getting night-time radio locations and then went to the dancing grounds that he was trapping on and set the traps for the morning. About 3 a.m. we went back to the motel. I crashed into a bed. John got out the *USA Today* paper he picked up on the way over, turned on the TV to a sports channel and commenced reading the paper. Next thing I knew John was waking me up at 5 a.m. to go check traps. We had a productive morning catching several hens and cocks. I was schooled on sexing, aging, and putting radios on and recording data for him while he processed birds. After the birds were released we drove around tracking birds to get daytime locations. About mid-afternoon we went to the motel with a pizza and watched ESPN. About the time I was falling asleep he woke me up to go start checking traps for the evening.

After processing the evening catch we started radio tracking again to get night locations. Finally, about



*Dave Trauba, Gary Huschle and John Toepfer hunting lesser prairie-chickens in Kansas. Photo: Greg Septon*

midnight we got to the motel room and I crashed into a bed while John started watching TV and reading *USA Today*. Sunday morning was a repeat of him getting me up at 5, trapping, processing birds, getting daytime locations, pizza, evening trapping, unsetting the traps, getting night locations. About midnight we changed vehicles and started the 4-hour drive back to Devils Lake. I was totally beat and only repeated this endeavor one more time. John not only repeated this nearly every weekend for four years but he kept up this pace and dedication for the next 30 years!

John loved sports and delighted in taking on the young guys who worked for him in one-on-one basketball. I don't recall ever hearing of one of them beating him in the game! He usually was wearing knee-high rubber boots but his high school point guard abilities always came through. John and his high school team was recently inducted into their High School Hall of Fame for having a team go the furthest into the play-offs even to this day.

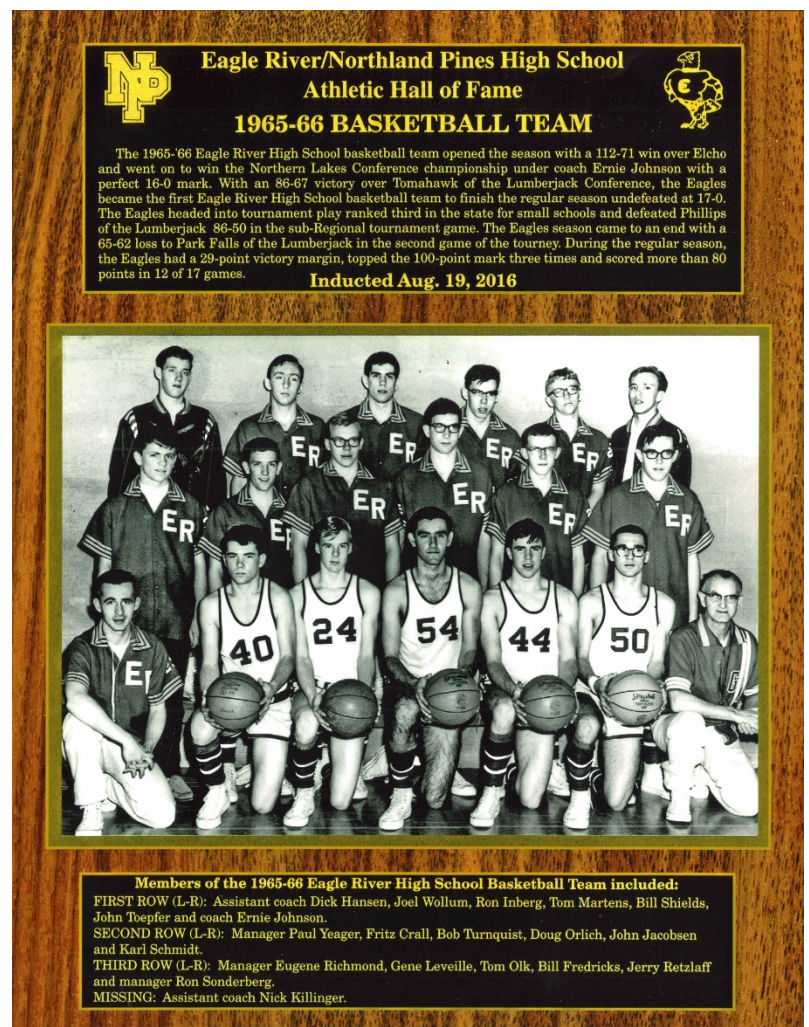
## JOHN AND SOFTBALL

*Kathy Huschle*  
Leonard, MN

I first met John on the softball field. Yes, I knew who he was from things my husband (Gary Huschle) had shared with me, such as trapping birds, collars, tracking birds, etc. So, I was surprised that he was going to be part of the team. Preconceived notions about what people can or cannot do really have no place in this world.

When we moved to North Dakota I found out that there were a number of ball players working with Gary and Devils Lake had a co-ed softball league. So with some recruiting, a team was put together. We had a variety of player skills on this team, ranging from someone who played college baseball to someone who was playing because his wife "begged" him so we would have enough players. And then there was John.

When Gary told me he was playing on our team, I expected someone to show up in waders, blue jeans, and a flannel shirt. But no, he had on shorts, the team shirt, and tennis shoes. And boy could he play. He ran fast, fielded the ball well and could hit the cover off the ball. Having John on our softball team for those few years that we played in North Dakota was a lot of fun. He could take the crap from other players and he could certainly give it back.



*John was an accomplished athlete in high school.*

And until the day he died, whenever we would talk, he would talk baseball (Dodgers and Twins) or softball with me. He knew that I coached for many springs and would always ask how the team was doing.

I don't think anybody on that ND team is playing anymore. We all got kind of old. But the memories are there and John is a big part of those memories.

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## **SPRINGTIME WITH JOHN TOEPFER**

*Terry Wolfe*

Retired MN DNR wildlife manager. Crookston, MN.

April 2012 and 2013, Seier National Wildlife Refuge, Rose, Nebraska, about 15 miles south of Bassett

In the spring of 2012 and 2013, I helped John capture and band/radio tag prairie chickens. Quite an experience. He headquartered out of a quite new house on the refuge. I believe the house had been built by the F&WS to house biologists working on the refuge, but due to cutbacks it was available to rent and made a nice "chicken ranch," though there wasn't a bed in the place. We slept on the carpeted floor, when there was time.

I arrived on April 3rd the first year, in the afternoon, just in time to jump into an outgoing van (I do believe it had been the Hamerstrom van), with Krista Kenyon, a U of M Crookston student volunteer from Manitoba. The tail pipe was dragging so we twisted it off and placed it in the rear of the van where it remained for at least two years. Krista was on an evening run to watch traps on three booming grounds until dark. No chickens were to remain in a trap overnight. At the peak of breeding, chickens were on booming grounds in morning and evening - and so were we! After dark we all arrived back at the ranch with chickens in hand (Actually in wooden boxes with cardboard liners made specifically for the use). Many generations of prototypes I expect. There was a little time to eat, and some food was provided. John mostly lived on diet Mountain Dew; about two, 20-ouncers per day. There was usually a six pack or two in the back of his truck. Evenings were spent in downloading - How many did you catch, which grounds, any hens . . . ? Each of us had our story. About four routes were run so this took awhile. Then there was the need to put trucks back together for the morning run. Each night there seemed to be an issue with one or more vehicles.

About 10 p.m. the chickens caught in the evening were brought out for processing. John was the processor. As I think about it now, this was his highlight of the day. Each bird was brought out and a whole page of measurements was made. John measured and we neophytes filled in the blanks - primaries, scapulars, calamus diameter (high, low), net weight, tarsus length, tarsus width, pectinate, tail length, toe length, toe width, nail length, nail width, and so many more. Then band numbers and finally a radio attached. Early the next morning, on the booming ground where caught, the chicken was released. This also happened during the day with chickens caught in the morning.

In my first year the chickens were processed in the garage. In 2013, they had moved to the kitchen table. Each chicken contributed a few feathers to the floor. Usually by 11 p.m. or later we would be done; not John though. He poured through the data and kept a running tally of numbers



because we had a quota to fill. He wanted a sample size from Nebraska and Minnesota each spring.

Things were quiet until around 4:30 AM when we needed to be up and getting ready to be at our booming grounds about when the chickens arrived. I believe it was Gary Huschle who noted it was like a Maestro orchestrating the whole affair. At 5:30 AM one could step out of the garage and hear the whole fleet purring in the morning frost – Well, not all. Two need a jump. “Did you jiggle the key?” “Did you push the clutch all the way to the floor?” Huh?

The Ranger was the crown jewel in the fleet. Somehow I got to operate it, 336,000 miles. Doesn’t take too much education to run it. “Don’t take the key out. If you do you have to line it up just right to get it back in again.” Most vehicles required a working knowledge of all the intricacies. In 2012, a spring broke on Dave Trauba’s donated Toyota flatbed way into the back hills – the whole spring. We wedged a cottonwood chunk underneath to hold the body off the wheel, then used a tie strap to keep the axle from totally falling off. Gary Huschle limped it all the way out to a blacktop so a tow truck could haul it to Bassett for repairs.

Communications weren’t simple. Cell phones didn’t work most of the time. There were few hills high enough to send and receive from. We were all 20 to 30 miles from the ranch on our individual chicken routes and we were all east of it. Sometimes we were moving or remodeling traps and needed help. Sometimes the morning chicken catch needed to get to one location in the field for processing. John was always working on radios to have enough for the next day. At times we had to be on certain hilltops to talk.

One safety rule we observed was, if you aren’t back by 10 p.m. we’ll come looking for you. One night another U of M Crookston student volunteer, Tim Baker hadn’t returned. Going out then made for a short sleep night. Tim was found in an open sand area dug into the sand. He had a four-wheel drive truck, but it was an older one where the hubs had to be locked in. With hubs locked in the truck walked out. John had many volunteers over the years and he patiently worked with them.

Each booming ground had a name and we had to learn their locations quickly. Sybrant, Smith, SE Smith, Pony, Nolles, Pond and many more; named for landowners or physical features nearby. The Pony Lake school was still going; about 10 students in 2012. “When I was going there we had about 25 students” said one local rancher. A decoration in front of school was a round hay bale with a head and tail to look like a turkey; using what’s at hand. John occasionally brought chickens in for an educational visit. I’m not sure the chickens learned much.

One morning, after the chickens left the grounds, we passed the Nolles sharptail ground on our way to a rendezvous site to exchange boxes. John noticed a sharptail in a trap as we drove by – some distance from the road. In amazement Gary Huschle and I watched as he blazed across the grass, radio antenna waving, a fast stop, jump out and run to get hold of the bird before it found its way out of the trap – which occasionally happened. The enthusiasm was still there after all the years.

In the spring of 2013 my plan was to stay a week. We were short of our goal and then at week end a Nebraska blizzard blew in. With enough snow to completely cover our traps, power lines down here and there, and roads blocked, I wasn’t leaving. A day after the blowing subsided John was anxious to check traps to make sure they were empty. We worked the back roads in going

around closed areas to get to booming grounds. It was a trio of John, Gary Huschle, and myself. After checking the traps we could get to, John decided we could shovel things out and get back to business with some of them. Sometimes, chicken wire leads, two feet high, were 150 feet long. These were mostly buried. Gary and I found ourselves shoveling out leads running in various directions, while questioning the sanity of it, as John cleaned out traps. We were basically clearing out a trench on one side of the lead. Why would a chicken walk down a trench along a lead into a trap? The next morning we were back and had chickens in some of the traps! Listen to the expert.

Once the goal to radio tag enough hens was reached in Nebraska, the trappers moved to Minnesota. This wasn't a leisurely take down the traps, pack them up, and head north. The traps were checked in the early morning. They were taken down and packed to go north, which involved a fair amount of work and time. By late afternoon the packing was done and it was "pedal to the metal" heading north. The race was on to catch hens in the peak of booming ground visits. The Minnesota peak was a little behind Nebraska. By this time I had found a way to escape. I knew John's new crew was headed north, with trucks full of chicken wire, whooping it up over met goals in Nebraska. And John saying, "If we don't break down we can set up a couple of grounds yet tonight (in the dark) as I know where they are by the wind towers. We can set them up in the headlights. Then we'll have something to check in the morning (in a couple of hours), and can set up more after that." Ah, such intensity – gotta love it – if not too near it.

For years, John drove mostly Toyota pickups. A trademark here in northwestern Minnesota. A rusting away Toyota pickup with an antenna sticking out the top! Many people knew him or of him. He seemed to have good relationships with landowners wherever he went.

Truly a field biologist. I miss his hour-long calls, often as he was driving back and forth on I-29.

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## THOUGHTS OF JOHN TOEPFER

*Kent (KC) Jensen*

SDSU, Brookings, SD 12 October 2018

I received the sad news today of the passing of one of my oldest and personally influential friends, John Toepfer. John and I first met when we were both in graduate school at Montana State University working under Dr. Bob Eng. John was working on a prairie chicken project on the Sheyenne National Grasslands in North Dakota. To say John was a prairie chicken expert is a gross understatement, this man lived and breathed prairie chickens for his entire adult life. John was one of the original "gaboons" that cut their teeth as field biologists under the tutelage of Drs. Frances and Frederick Hamerstrom in central Wisconsin. John took their training in intense observation and detailed record keeping to heart; he was a meticulous biologist and recorded minute details of every observation. John lived the life of an itinerant field biologist; John never married and settled down with a family, but instead traveled and lived where there was work to be done and the need for a prairie chicken biologist. His most recent and last residence was in Oklahoma, working for the Sutton Avian Research Center on several of their projects addressing prairie chicken biology and conservation. John had a crusty exterior that belied a soft as mush soul; sadly, for many it was hard to get through the crust. We both loved to fish, and we both were long time Dodger fans; and

we had great discussions about baseball and prairie chickens - what more could there be!! Our mutual friend, Bill Moritz, and I often thought we should put John in a room with a chair and a video recorder, sit John in the chair with a 6-pack of Coke (I don't think he ever drank alcohol), turn on the recorder and simply say the words "prairie chicken," and quietly slip out for 5 or 6 hours. The result, we postulated would be a tome on prairie chickens to be unequalled! Godspeed John - I'll miss you, my friend. Cheers all – KC

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## REMEMBERING JOHN TOEPFER

*Jerry Kobriger*

When Dr. John first started his work on prairie grouse in North Dakota, I think the old pickups he used had to come from a junk yard somewhere. They were held together with baling wire and duct tape, probably with a little gum thrown in here and there. I'm sure none would have passed inspection if the highway patrol ever checked. Most were not safe to ride in.

I met John south of New Town one summer day, John had several radios on sharptails in the area and he was going to give me a tour of his study area. When I got in his pickup there was the strong smell of gasoline. I commented on the smell and John said "ya, by the way don't light any matches, my gas tank has a leak and I can only fill it about half full. The gas splashes out when I drive over these rough two track trails. You don't smoke do you?"

Guess where the gas tank was. Right behind the seat in the cab of the pickup. I cautioned John not to hit any rocks and make sparks. John said it helps to keep the windows open, the smell isn't too bad. Not sure how long he drove that pickup. It may have been the one that was stolen out of the motel parking lot in Grand Forks. John came out one morning and his pickup was gone. He reported the loss to the Grand Forks police department and assumed he would have his pickup back soon, as it had the large yagi antenna on top so how hard would it be to find it? The police never did but somebody reported it parked somewhere so John did get it back.

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*John and his field trucks. Photo: Jen Ruch*

## MEMORIES OF JOHN TOEPFER

*Jen Ruch*

Former grad student – University of Manitoba, now with Washington Outdoor Women, Bellevue, WA

John taught me how to change a tire outside an old barn in rural Minnesota. It wasn't flat, but there was a good chance it would be one day while out in a muddy field with no cell phone service. "How did your dad never teach you how to change a tire?!" he asked incredulously. Within a month, the truck had a flat tire. However, I was able to make it to the little Felton gas station where I ran into a kind young man who offered to change it for me in exchange for some cigarettes which I happily paid. When later told the story, once again, John was incredulous. I have changed tires since then, and I always thank John before I pull out the jack.

John came into my life during a period of immense pain and transition. He was just what I didn't know I needed. No coddling, no nonsense (okay, a little bit of nonsense)... just hard work in search of answers. About two weeks in to my time with John, my head nearly went through the truck windshield when the driver (another field tech named Paul) failed to see a washout in the dirt road. I think John gave about 2 days grace before he said "The chickens don't sleep in, why

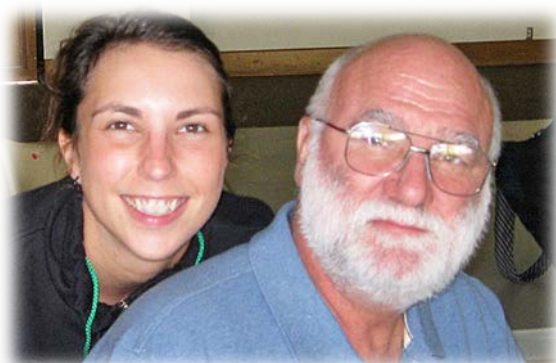


*Jen and John with prairie-chickens in hand - by Hamerstrom van.*

should you?" There were also moments of amazing forgiveness. I failed to see a low-hanging branch while driving down the road and bent the truck's antenna beyond repair. "I've never done that" he would say, indicating that, indeed, he had done that before and had made plenty of mistakes. Out in the field, he would yell, I would cry... but by the end of the field season, I was yelling back. I suppose that behavior was analogous to my growth, professionally and personally. Thanks to John, I was more confident, skilled, and now dedicated to the health of the natural world.

My thesis was somewhat rudimentary, but the part of my life spent with John was anything but. We remained friends, chatted for hours on the phone, and he continued to provide the guidance I needed navigating new jobs and life after grad school. I miss him terribly. But the first thing I felt upon learning of his passing (besides shock and sadness) was gratitude. I can't imagine my life without John having been in it, and I'll be forever thankful for his service to birds and the people he loved.

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*Jen and John*



## **SOME TOEPFER MEMORIES FROM A FORMER GRAD STUDENT**

*Nate Emery*

University of North Dakota M.S. from 2007-2010, and University of Minnesota Crookston B.S.

I only spent time with Dr. Toepfer probably 6 times in my life. You could tell that he was passionate about grouse and his work and education. The attribute I found amazing is that despite his decades of experience; he listened to each and every person about their observations without leaping into detailed recall of his pursuits. That and every anomaly or non-traditional interaction should be a note or publication.

He was warm and accommodating and wasn't afraid to back up a contrarian position with meticulous notes and recall (like a greater prairie chicken hen that repeatedly hatched and brooded in decades old smooth brome).

My biggest laughing moment was when I was invited to do night checks with him. I showed up with my spotlight attached to a football helmet and heavy car battery to power the set-up. I then added a high-powered headlamp off the desk and we took off. Isn't technology great! In contrast to that was his affinity for Toyota trucks; old Toyota trucks. Sometimes you change with the times and others you stick to what you know works. He was capable of both and weaving them into what was best for the science and for the grouse.

I miss that wonderful man and knowing he's out there stalking the prairies. Luckily, he felt it was so critical to spend time with the younger biologists and there are many still out there continuing on with Toepfer tales influencing and focusing their work.

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## **THOUGHTS ABOUT AN EDUCATOR, FIELD BIOLOGIST AND FRIEND**

*Bernie Westfahl*

I first met John when STCP was considering hiring him to do research on the WI GPC to determine what the problems were. I'm an attorney by profession with no biology or PC training and John figured that out quickly. I wanted to learn and am not someone who will just take your word for something, I want to know why, or who and see what you are basing something on. I learned from John what a true field biologist is. Someone who actually goes into the field and does it when the birds can be observed, not necessarily when it is comfortable or easy. I joined John on occasion and learned why it was done then. He had little use for those who just read about the birds and didn't experience them. Reading is very important, but you must also be there to understand. He tried to be polite, but he had no patience for something that was wrong. He would question concepts and you had better be able to stand behind concepts and defend positions. He was exceptionally honest and could not accept anyone using someone else's ideas or research without citing it properly. He could never accept that being done to anyone else, and it seems to be something that is overlooked by others frequently. He became a mentor to me who is not well educated in the area and had patience as long as I tried. He would listen to my thoughts and patiently explain why I didn't understand. I had the pleasure of going down to Bartlesville in the summer of 2018 to see him. He was kind enough to call me on a regular basis and just talk. I think he enjoyed telling me what he and others had discovered and he knew I appreciated it. I miss him often. If I see a PC or just a prairie, I can look at it and let my mind wander to some great moments I had with John. I will not, cannot forget him.

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## JOHN STORIES

*Dave Azure*

“You can only have one limiting factor.” “Huh?” was my response to go with what I’m sure was a perplexed look on my face. “There are lots of things that can affect population size, but you can only have one limiting factor at a time. Either you improve on that one factor until something else becomes limiting, or circumstances will naturally change to cause some other thing to become the limiting factor,” John patiently, yet assertively explained to his graduate student. I was probably in my second field season of an investigation into American bittern life history at Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge when John shared that nugget with me; can’t remember where we were or what we were doing exactly (we were probably working on prairie chickens), but John rarely passed up an opportunity to turn any situation into a wildlife lesson. Many will remember that John prided himself as an Aldo Leopold disciple. Since he, himself, studied under Fran Hamerstrom, he would often say to me with a grin – “you’re fourth-generation Leopold!” After many long days bouncing down dirt roads with John and many long drives in the wee hours of the morning following a long night of night-lighting prairie chickens, I eventually felt like I had read Leopold’s *Game Management* at least three times.

John was an eccentric, yet bona fide genius in my opinion. I don’t know how many other people felt that way. Many, I hope; but sometimes I wonder. I heard John give a presentation at a conference one time where he said “grizzly bears would do just fine living in downtown Chicago. They’d just feed on garbage and homeless people.” The nervous laugh of the crowd indicated they didn’t know if John was being serious or not (of course, he was). Gary Huschle, the Biologist at Agassiz probably said it best when he told me “John has a lot of idiosyncrasies, but once you figure those out, you’ll be alright.” And I found that to be very true. Once a person got used to the antennae sticking out of the roof of every Toyota pickup that John owned, and once a person got used to working anywhere from 3 to 23 hours straight with John (depending on what was needed to finish the job), and finally, once that person got used to drinking warm Coke from the open case that John always seemed to have in the pickup bed...well, then that person was alright.

I, fortunately, had an inkling of what I was getting into as I started my field work with John in the spring of 1996. His reputation preceded him, after all. During my first week, I was to meet John at the farmhouse that he rented outside of Mahanomen, MN to help him check prairie chicken traps that had been set on booming grounds in the area (in hindsight... for being a bittern student, I sure spent a lot of time working on prairie chickens!). Not wanting to be late, I left home in plenty of time to ensure John wouldn’t be waiting for me. I arrived in the dark to a very dark farmhouse and, for a moment, was not sure I was at the right place. However, the Toyota parked in the driveway appearing to be getting a good signal from Fargo’s KVLV station was a dead giveaway. I went inside, turned on a light, sat at the kitchen table and waited for John to wake up. He came downstairs about 30 minutes later, saw me sitting there, and said “why didn’t you wake me up?” “Really?!” I thought to myself. “I’ve only met you one time, I’m a brand new graduate student, this is our first day together, I’m already nervous and you think I’m going to walk into your bedroom and tell you to get your ass out of bed?!?” Looking back, there probably would have been

no quicker way to endear myself to John than to do exactly that. But who knew? Certainly not me. Not yet, anyway.

As alluded to above, John would do whatever necessary to get the job done, and he expected his graduate students to do the same. That first morning, we were checking traps set by one of his other graduate students on a booming ground unfamiliar to John (hard to believe, I know). Anyway, we ended up on the wrong side of a creek – traps with birds on one side and us on the other. After a frantic minute of looking for a dry crossing, John had enough. Into the creek he went - boots, socks, pants, shirt and coat still on – to get across to the other side before those trapped and now-agitated chickens hurt themselves. Still wanting to make a good first impression, into the creek I went right behind him. Darned if I was going to show any sign of not being as committed to the task as he. Afterwards, when things had settled down, John said “you know, we didn’t *both* have to get wet. You could have gone around.” Looking back now, I know that John appreciated the fact that I was right behind him and not afraid to get a little dirty to get the job done. But since this was just the first day, he wasn’t about to heap any sort of praise on this yet unproven newbie in his midst.



*John Toepfer spent a lot of time in the Hamerstrom van. Photos: Jen Ruch*

Two years of graduate school passed by quickly. John turned out to not only be a wonderful mentor, but also a great friend. I always enjoyed our time together and the lessons he shared. I could tell you more about his thoughts related to auto-correlation in telemetry studies (he thought those concerns were crap) and “satellite” booming grounds (no such thing... those grounds don’t orbit around anything), but I fear I’d be repeating the same themes. It’s now been over 20 years since I was one of John’s students and I’m enjoying a productive and fulfilling career with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. To this day, I draw upon lessons John taught me. In particular – “you can only have one limiting factor.” It’s a lesson that transcends biology and I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve used that expression in some aspect of refuge management or administration.

Gary was right... John certainly had his idiosyncrasies. But he also had a huge heart and I came to understand that he would do just about anything for those he cared about if needed. I hope he knew that I would have done the same for him. Rest peacefully, Dr. Toepfer.

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## THE TOEPFER BOOT CAMP FOR FIELD BIOLOGISTS

*Aaron Pratt*

John Toepfer was a field biologist at his core. It was what he loved to do, and it was what he thought was necessary to make meaningful observations on your species of study. He was molded by the likes of Ray Anderson and Fran and Fred Hamerstrom and was driven by his love for prairie grouse and other wildlife. While conducting his field research, he was also running a boot camp, of sorts, training the next generation of field biologists.

Numerous wildlife students passed through this boot camp over the decades. I can quickly think of 15 that coincided with my tenure. Some stayed for days while others endured for years. Not everyone graduated, but everyone emerged with a little more character than when they entered. He could turn a greenhorn into a seasoned biologist if they were willing. In fact, John would often say that we should have been paying him for the experience, not vice versa.

Here are 10 lessons, in no particular order, you learned while suffering through, I mean being trained at, the Toepfer Boot Camp for Field Biologists.

Lesson 1. There is no time like the present to further your education. I remember the very first day I met John when I was only 19 years old. I arrived in the evening at an old farmhouse in Minnesota. He was sitting at the kitchen table and immediately started a couple hour lecture on science, math, grouse biology, and who knows what else. The lectures and lessons learned never stopped, whether I wanted them to or not, and many were repeated over and over again. We got little sleep that night and started very early the next morning.

Lesson 2. Develop a work ethic. We worked almost 24/7, only with respite on days when it was raining too hard to be productive. One day usually stands out in my mind as an example. We had worked for most of the day in Wisconsin, then we drove through the night (with a brief nap on some interstate off ramp) to North Dakota, got there by dawn so we could locate booming grounds, caught another quick nap, set-up traps on the booming grounds, monitored traps in the evening, processed birds, etc., etc., so on and so forth.

Lesson 3. Develop the necessary fortitude. Not only did you work long hours, but everything was done according to John's schedule which is unlike any normal human being's. This included only one meal a day. To get your daily requirement of food and sleep you had to fit it in when you could. We also spent weeks in motel rooms. John had a bad habit of needing to sleep with the lights and TV on and he snored something awful. Living with him at his house wasn't much better with the mountains of old wildlife literature, biological samples, homemade radio transmitters in various stages of construction, which would all create a maze between the refrigerator, bathroom, and your bed. However, the longer you worked for him (and the older he got) the more luxuries you received. A luxury like your own motel room.

Lesson 4. Get a large sample size. If you are going to do a study, do it right and get a meaningful sample size from which you can make conclusions. There were some summers in Minnesota where he located and monitored 100 prairie chicken nests, basically by himself.

Lesson 5. Be resourceful. Sometimes we would need to improvise and make do with what we had, given our high expectations of obtaining large sample sizes across multiple study areas. As I



mentioned, a lot of times we stayed in motels while trapping and we were capturing, transporting, and processing a lot of birds. Now, I cannot corroborate this story because I wasn't there, but one of the most notable stories I remember him telling me was about the time he was kicked out of a motel for holding prairie chickens in dresser drawers. They were apparently discovered by the cleaning lady while he stepped out of the room. We had some really good relationships with some motel owners but not so good with others.

Lesson 6. You do not need fancy and expensive equipment to do a good job. John was able to maintain a fleet of his own field trucks by using inexpensive but very practical, small used Toyotas (or a close relative). Because they were so well used, they did have their quirks. One example was the Bittern truck which stunk so bad because of the extended family of mice who called it home. It also stalled every time you pushed in the clutch which made city driving difficult. I became an expert at coasting through stop lights so there was just enough momentum to still be able to jump the truck when the light turned green.

Lesson 7. Respect and learn from your predecessors. Conversations with John would often turn into story time about Ray Anderson and the Hamerstoms. He had the utmost respect for them, and John's greatest compliment was a quality he saw in you that reminded him of them.

Lesson 8. Don't develop a technique that you can't complete yourself. When we first started collecting large blood samples for various tests from prairie chickens via a vein in the neck, John was not the most comfortable. However, like everything else, he found a way to hold and draw the blood by himself for the many times he would be capturing and processing birds alone. John was a beast when it came to processing birds. When nightlighting prairie chickens in the summer to replace dying radio transmitters, he would get set-up in the Hamerstrom van continuously processing birds as I delivered them. It was no small feat for him to single-handedly process 30 birds during a spring morning when we were trapping for a translocation.

Lesson 9. Make observations on all aspects related to your study species' life history. John went above and beyond normal expectations for research. He promoted and completed investigations on cocks and juveniles and working at night and during winter. These times and seasons may inconvenience some, but John felt they were necessary to fully understand your study species.

Lesson 10. Be generous with your resources. I don't know if people realize how much of John's personal money went into helping support the research projects he was involved with. John would buy field clothing/gear for you if you were in need. He was always willing to share a diet Mountain Dew. It was disgusting, but sometimes, usually around 3 am or so, I would get desperate enough. He also paid for hundreds upon hundreds of dinners for us while conducting fieldwork. It was part of our unofficial pay and came directly from him. A favorite of the crew would be an all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet at 6 in the morning after working all night. He also enjoyed having fun with us. He coordinated a few significant all-expenses-paid fishing trips that I was fortunate to attend. They were a real treat and a nice break from work, though we were probably talking about prairie chickens more often than not, even while fishing.

These are just the first 10 lessons that I thought of. I know that there are many more principles that I undoubtedly live by but have forgotten where they originated. John was an infinite storehouse of information on grouse biology, avian capture methods, radio telemetry techniques, among other

things. About 95% of what I know about grouse came from John. Right before I first met John on that spring evening in Minnesota, I had to get out my field guide to look up what a prairie chicken was. I had come from the North Woods knowing nothing of the prairie and did not have a clue what I was getting myself into.

These days working with students, technicians, and, yes, even supervisors and administrators, I wish they had all gone through the Toepfer Boot Camp for Field Biologists. I think I was the student that worked for him the longest; but, I suspect it just took me the longest to graduate.

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## **IN MEMORIAM OF DR. JOHN E. TOEPFER (1948-2018)**

*Greg Septon*

Although the world of prairie grouse is relatively small, there have been a few researchers whose names have loomed large and who have contributed much to our understanding of these remarkable birds – Dr. John Toepfer was an individual whose name shone brightly among that elite group.

On October 9, 2018 John went in for routine hip replacement surgery and was doing well afterwards. However, two days later his heart suddenly stopped and he could not be revived.

A native of Wisconsin, John earned his B.S. and M.S. in 1972 and 1976 respectively at the University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point where he developed a life-long interest in greater prairie chickens and a special friendship with Drs. Frederick and Frances Hamerstrom. As part of his Ph.D. work he made the first attempt to reintroduce prairie chickens at Crex Meadows Wildlife Area in northwest Wisconsin.

John earned a Ph.D. in Biological Sciences with Dr. Bob Eng at Montana State University with his thesis on “*The Ecology of the Greater Prairie Chicken as Related to Reintroductions.*” As a Professor at Little Hoop Community College at Fort Totten Indian Reservation in North Dakota, he developed the first Tribal College Native American Wildlife Program and was instrumental in the development of the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative.

Although John’s focus was prairie grouse, in 1978 he also followed radio-marked sandhill cranes from Wisconsin/Minnesota to Florida and back, documenting the migration routes and stopover areas that are now being used to reestablish an eastern population of endangered whooping cranes. He also developed radio-marking, trapping, and handling methods for American bitterns to study basic life history, locate wintering areas, and document migration routes using telemetry and satellite transmitters.

In 1992 John implemented a translocation of prairie chickens into the Bry Prairie Chicken Wildlife Management Area and surrounding area of North Dakota from Minnesota. This project was the beginning of 25 consecutive years of research on prairie chickens in Minnesota.

In 1992-1993, he also translocated greater prairie chickens from Minnesota into Illinois to initiate the successful genetic rescue of the species in that state where a small, isolated, remnant population is now being maintained. From 1996 - 2015, he served as Research Consultant with the

Society of Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus, Ltd. (STCP) conducting field research on prairie chickens in Wisconsin and across their range. To address STCP's concerns regarding declining prairie-chicken numbers and their future in Wisconsin, he developed and carried out their flagship field research project: *Prairie Chickens & Grasslands: 2000 and Beyond*.

As a result of his findings, he subsequently translocated 40 greater prairie chicken hens from Minnesota into Wisconsin to increase declining genetics of that state's isolated, remnant population. Today, greater prairie chickens persist on the Buena Vista Marsh in Central Wisconsin – their last stronghold in the state.

John served on the Attwater's Prairie-Chicken Recovery Team and on the Board of the North American Grouse Partnership. In 2003, he received The Hamerstrom Award from the Prairie Grouse Technical Council for outstanding contributions in the field of prairie grouse biology. In 2009, he was also the recipient of the Minnesota Award by the Minnesota Chapter of the Wildlife Society. This is the Chapter's highest award and is presented to individuals who have made outstanding contributions to Minnesota's wildlife and natural resources.

John also served as the Principal Investigator on STCP's prairie chicken research project in the Sandhills of Nebraska, perhaps the last, best place to study a large, stable population of prairie chickens in native habitat. This project titled: *The Sandhills of Nebraska: 2012-2015 – A Focus on the Future* set out to study the year-round ecology of the greater prairie chicken in the core of the range where large, healthy populations are associated with large expanses of native grassland habitat. It is ironic that with all the research done on the greater prairie chicken in 75 years, the single dominant question that remained was "What is normal?" This study answered that question and will have lasting impacts for future management of the species.

In 2015, STCP struck a major deal with the George Miksch Sutton Avian Research Center (Sutton Center) to benefit prairie grouse research and conservation efforts well into the future. The agreement involved dissolution of STCP, with \$1M of the proceeds being generously gifted to the Sutton Center. These funds are being used to support and expand research and conservation studies on prairie grouse. Under the agreement, John joined the Sutton Center as the first STCP/Hamerstrom Prairie Grouse Research Chair. There he continued his life's work of conducting and publishing scientific research on prairie grouse as well as assisting with captive production and subsequent release into the wild of greater prairie chickens raised at the Sutton Center's new Attwater's prairie-chicken captive breeding facility.

For nearly 50 years, John studied and actively worked to conserve and fully understand grouse across the American prairie and published more than 70 scientific and popular press articles about this research. His lifelong commitment to understanding prairie grouse and greater prairie chickens in particular was fueled by his incredible passion for the birds and his steadfast work ethic.

John and I were close friends for over 25 years and his passing came as an unexpected shock to all of us who were fortunate to have known and worked with him over the years. Suffice to say, he will be greatly missed by all those whose lives he touched and influenced.

To honor John's life and help ensure his legacy, The G. M. Sutton Avian Research Center set up a fund to create the John Toepfer Prairie Grouse Research Scholarship. This scholarship

fund will complement the STCP/Hamerstrom Prairie Grouse Chair position at the Sutton Center and provide opportunities for continued work on the prairie grouse John committed his life to saving. The Sutton Center is also seeking help to build a prairie grouse repository, where the vast amount of data and specimens left behind by the Hamerstoms, Ray Anderson, and John Toepfer are currently kept.

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## **JOHN TOEPFER PRAIRIE GROUSE RESEARCH SCHOLARSHIP**

*Aaron Pratt*

STCP/Hamerstrom Prairie Grouse Chair, Sutton Center

Dr. John Toepfer devoted 50 years to research and conservation of prairie grouse and mentored dozens of students. He unselfishly provided resources, encouragement, and advice to students and colleagues, and encouraged long-term field studies rather than purely academic research. To honor John's life and to continue his legacy of supporting prairie grouse students, the G. M. Sutton Avian Research Center established the *John Toepfer Prairie Grouse Research Scholarship* fund. This fund will provide opportunities for continued work on the prairie grouse John committed his life to saving and will ensure the availability of perpetual support for graduate students studying prairie grouse. This award will be given in recognition that the sun is rising on the future of prairie grouse. The first scholarship will be presented at the 2019 Prairie Grouse Technical Council meeting in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Tax-deductible contributions can be made to the *John Toepfer Prairie Grouse Research Scholarship* by donations to Sutton Avian Research Center. Define with the donation that it goes towards the scholarship. Credit card donations can be made on the website [suttoncenter.org](http://suttoncenter.org) and checks can be mailed to:

G. M. Sutton Avian Research Center  
P.O. Box 2007  
Bartlesville, OK 74005





## JOHN TOEPFER MONUMENT AT BUENA VISTA MARCH

*Peter Ziegler*

August 28, 2019

I went up to the Buena Vista Marsh this morning to watch the monument to John put in place. It looks fantastic. I got a lump in my throat after the truck left when a prairie chicken flew over the kiosk with the big bluestem waving in the strong wind.



*Wisconsin State Historical marker 585 over John Toepfer at Buena Vista Marsh Wildlife Area. Photo: Peter Ziegler*

**Dr. John E. Toepfer  
1948-2018**

**A native of Wisconsin and a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, John Toepfer made a life-long commitment to researching the greater prairie chicken, much of it on these grasslands of Central Wisconsin. John's research addressed declining prairie chicken numbers and their future in Wisconsin. In 2003, the Prairie Grouse Technical Council awarded him the prestigious Hamerstrom Award and recognized him as one of the foremost prairie chicken researchers in North America.**

The placement got delayed a week because the boulder weighed 3900 pounds and the original truck could only lift 3500 pound monuments. Only seems appropriate that John gave them a hard time.

This took longer and with more effort than I originally anticipated, but it was worth it. A very fitting tribute in the right location for a great researcher.



*The Buena Vista Marsh Wildlife Area kiosk with John's monument to the left. Photo: Peter Ziegler*

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## MISCELLANEOUS PHOTOS

*John Toepfer archives*



*John and his very good friend Fran Hamerstrom*



*John holding a bald eagle*



*Night lighting prairie-chickens*



*John giving a talk from roof of a pickup truck*





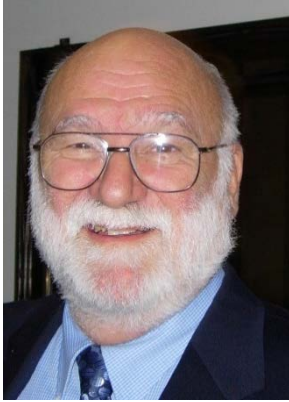


*John loved to fish but refused to eat them!*









This booklet is a collection of stories about Dr. John E. Toepfer (1948-2018), one of the foremost prairie-chicken experts, written by those who knew and interacted with him. After reading them, one will not only get a good laugh or two, but get an idea of what a very special person he was. Thanks to the many contributors, and for the financial donations to establish a scholarship in John's honor.