



IN MEMORIAM

William J. Hamilton
Professor of Mammalogy
Davis
1931 – 2006

William J. Hamilton III was born in Ithaca, New York on November 13, 1931. His father, William J. Hamilton II was a professor of mammalogy in Cornell's zoology department, and Bill cut his teeth as a naturalist trapping mice in the Adirondacks with him. Both men were famous for their irreverence and sense of fun. Both as it happened got nicknamed "Wild Bill" by friends. Bill loved to reminisce about their escapades. Stopping at a motel for ice to store their samples, Bill's father was asked "What ya want it fer? Just some human flesh we've got," WJIII replied. They had not gone half a mile when father and son were stopped by the local sheriff, sirens blaring. The appeal of further such adventures (and those who knew Bill can recall similar deadpan answers) was irresistible. After graduating from Cornell (1953), and service in the Korean War, Bill signed on to study with Starker Leopold at the University of California Berkeley, receiving his PhD in 1960. After post doctoral research at the California Academy of Sciences, studying dispersal patterns in starlings and with his wife, Marion, studying breeding among yellow-billed cuckoos in Arizona, he joined the faculty at UC- Davis in 1963, remaining there for the rest of his career.

His lifelong love affair with Africa began with a study of coral reef fish near Mozambique in 1963. Between 1968 and 1979 he embarked on multiple projects related to the ecology of desert insects in Egypt, Botswana and Namibia. Many of his most interesting findings were summarized in *Life's Color Code*, a text about the role of coloration and behavior in the various adaptations of animals to life in desert environments. The book is a little gem that remains as broad-ranging and fresh today as when first published in 1973. By this time, Bill was already well known to biologists for the standard text in the field, *Mechanisms of Animal Behavior* (1963) co-authored with his friend, Peter Marler.

In 1972, Bill undertook his first studies of African mammals, oryx and baboons in the Namib Desert and Botswana, and by 1976 had sent up a permanent field camp in the Okavango Swamp, Botswana to study an unusual population of savanna baboons, and subsequently (with John Bulger and John McNutt) a population of wild dogs between Angola and Mozambique. Famous for their multi-male social organization, the savanna baboons in the population Bill studied were also found in one-male mating groups. His analysis of paternal investment and infanticide by baboons in this population, co-authored with his graduate student Curt Busse and published in *Science* in 1981, revealed previously unsuspected dimensions to male behavior among these much studied, and theoretically important, African monkeys. The Okavango project established Bill as one of the foremost primatologists of his day, and the work Bill began there continues under the direction of scientists at the University of Pennsylvania. Students came from all over to work with Bill, and with his help, Ron Tilson and Rich Tenaza would undertake ground breaking studies of four previously almost unknown species of primates endemic to the Mentawi Islands. Meanwhile Jim Wittenberger was inspired to follow up on Bill's bird dispersal work. But Bill's main love remained Africa.

Even after Bill retired from UC Davis in 1994 he continued to teach annual courses on environmental problem solving and desertification to Namibian students at the Namib Desert Research Station currently under the direction of his former student, Dr. Mary Seely. Retirement also marked a new phase in Bill's

lifelong work as a conservationist. He described it as “evaluating environmental grandeur, local traditions and tourism values of nature”. At the top of his list of priorities was saving California’s increasingly endangered populations of Tricolored Blackbirds. Working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, often assisted by his grand- daughter Lily Starling, wading beside him through muddy Central Valley rice fields, Bill developed new management guidelines for this species.

Bill’s interest in biology was not just professional. He was a deeply and broadly informed, impassioned naturalist, one of the last of a dying breed. Equipped with a profound knowledge of evolutionary and ecological processes, driven by wide ranging curiosity, his life’s goal was preserving biodiversity. At Blue Oak ranch northwest of Winters, where he and his wife Marion had built their home and grew walnuts and mandarin oranges, where the two of them hosted weddings for graduate students and fund- raising events for the Yolo Land Trust, Bill also transformed large areas of the ranch into a world class nature preserve and teaching opportunity. Led around by Bill, students would learn how to catch lizards or find rattlesnake dens. He would take visiting scientists to wait outside the den of a wild badger, in the hopes that they might see one, but even if they didn’t, they would still learn how to use tree rings to reconstruct the history of a hillside, or how to identify some of the dozens of species of oak galls. If only he were still alive, several of us have a question to ask him about Anna’s hummingbird – whose brilliant sun oriented display flights he was the first to explain. But Bill died on April 24, 2006 of complications related to lymphoma. He is survived by his wife Marion Etter Hamilton, his daughter Susan Hamilton, three wonderful grandchildren, along with several populations of Tricolored Blackbirds and broad swaths of blue oak woodlands that he was instrumental in preserving.

Sarah B. Hrdy, Chair
Tim Caro
Peter Marler