



IN MEMORIAM

Seth Bertram Benson
Associate Professor of Zoology, Emeritus
UC Berkeley
1905 – 2005

Seth Benson was a mainstay in the life of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ) for almost 40 years. He retired in 1969, and died on August 2, 2005, at his home in Inverness (California), three months after his 100th birthday. At his 100th birthday party, he agreed to have one of us (K.K.) record an oral history from him as long as it was “soon,” and this was accomplished on May 23.

Benson was born on May 7, 1905 in Kern, California (near Bakersfield). His family soon moved to Two Harbors, Minnesota (1911-1914), but then returned to California, where they lived in San Fernando until 1923. Seth received a bachelor's degree in zoology from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1928, and a Ph.D. in 1933 under the sponsorship of Joseph Grinnell, director of MVZ. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Sigma in 1927, and to Sigma Xi in 1930. He married Helen Emma Dennis on December 28, 1928 in Berkeley. After completing his graduate studies, he continued for an additional year to hold a position of assistant curator, an appointment that began in 1932. Then he was appointed (1934-35) assistant curator of mammals at the Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan. Thereafter he returned to Berkeley to assume appointment as instructor in vertebrate zoology and assistant curator of mammals in MVZ effective July 1, 1935. Fortunately, this position became available after Robert T. Orr, formerly of the California Academy of Sciences, declined an offer for the job.

Seth Benson was promoted to assistant professor of zoology in 1940 and to associate professor and associate curator of mammals in 1945. His research centered on the systematics and evolution of mammals, especially of the American Southwest. He was best known for his monograph based on his doctoral research concerning the evolution of color morphs in desert rodents living on different soil types, ranging from white sands to black lava, in New Mexico. This was at a time when natural selection was not universally accepted by biologists, and hence his research was much appreciated and widely acknowledged as a classic. He published 42 papers during his career, the last in 1961 on a nomenclatural problem in trout. He set high standards for research both for his students and for himself. His colleagues generally felt that his limited publication record did not reflect his actual intellectual achievements, but rather his own self-imposed goals of perfection. His skills as an editor were widely appreciated and utilized by students and colleagues, and he was on the editorial board of the University of California Press in the early 1960s, and of Tulane University in 1953-54.

Benson's teaching assignments centered on the biology of mammals. His primary course was mammalogy, which he taught from about 1953 through 1968. He also regularly gave the mammal part of the museum's classic course in vertebrate natural history (1935-1968). From 1936 to 1946, he contributed to a course called Economic Vertebrate Zoology, which was a forerunner of later offerings in wildlife management and ecology. On the graduate level, he frequently gave a seminar course on speciation. At least six Ph.D. students finished their studies under his mentoring. His contributions to the collections of the museum were of monumental importance. He donated 13,639 of his own specimens, contributed 1,262 catalogued photographs, and

produced 25 bound volumes of his field notes.

Seth participated to a moderate degree in professional organizations. He was recording secretary of the American Society of Mammalogists from 1942 to 1947, and an elected director for a 3- year term (1947-1949). For at least three short periods he served, in the absence of the director, as acting director of MVZ. Benson was active in the Biosystematists, a Bay Area group of evolutionary biologists that met once a month, and served as its secretary for three years (1957-1960). In 1960-61, he was president of the Pacific Section of the Society for Systematic Zoology. And of course he served on various departmental and college committees.

After retirement, Benson moved to Inverness, donating his house in Kensington to the University. In his new home, he became active in local politics, often writing letters for the local newspapers. He also pursued research on the feeding ecology of hummingbirds, adorning his study walls with large graphs full of data. He is survived by three nieces and one nephew. Seth's wife Emma predeceased him by several years.

William Z. Lidicker Jr.
Karen Klitz