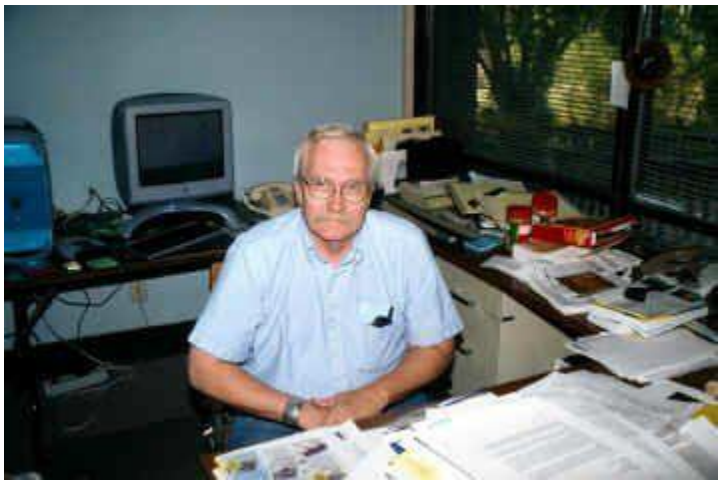
Bob Jennings, 1939-2004

Bob Jennings passed away Sept. 15th, 2004 after fighting a battle with melanoma. Bob was the founding director of Oxley Nature Center, and an avid birder, beer-sampler, and guitar player. Because his illness interfered more with his long-distance birding, his life-list of beers tasted finally passed the tally on his life-list of birds seen! Bob was at home with family, listening to music, and was very peaceful when he died. He is now out on that big nature trail above.



Tribute To Bob by Dick Sherry

Moments Shared with Bob by Tom Clark

Obituary from Tulsa World

Tributes to Bob

Photos of Bob

Remarks by Dick Sherry at the Celebration of Bob's Life, Sept. 20, 2004

I am Dick Sherry. I am an original Board Member of the organization that worked with the Park Board and Park Dept. to create a nature center in Mohawk Park.

In looking back, it is really a miracle that Oxley Nature Center exists. So many good things had to happen in a relatively short time, and one of the very best things that happened was when Bob Jennings accepted the position of Naturalist/Director in August of 1977. We liked Bob from the time we met him at the interview, and his quiet confidence gave us confidence that he was the right person to direct our fledgling nature center.

If it “takes a village to raise a child”, I believe it took a Bob to raise the Nature Center. If our organization was the “biological parents” of the Center, Bob became its Nanny, Godfather, Guardian, Mentor and Personal Trainer all rolled into one.

So much was accomplished in the 25 years Bob was the Oxley Director. But I want to focus on the first 3 and a half years. It was a MAGICAL time of HOPE, ANTICIPATION and PROGRESS. I would like to take you back to the Spring of 1977. We had the Master Plan from the National Audubon Society that had been approved by all the City governing bodies, and the generous donations of John and Mary Oxley and numerous other donors were in the bank, but the City did not have the funding for the Naturalist’s position. At that time the Junior League of Tulsa became a crutial partner in the Nature Center project. They agreed to fund most of the Naturalist’s salary for 2 years, to organize the volunteer guide program and to establish a nature center newsletter. This paved the way for the hiring of the Naturalist , and Bob’s first day was September 15, 1977.

Over the last few days, I have looked at many photographs and reread the old newspaper and magazine articles that were written about Bob and the Nature Center in the late 70’s, and I feel like we owe Kelly an apology. If there were nights when Bob came home worn-out and a little cranky, it was probably our fault. We were asking him to do so many things at once!

We had been advised by the National Audubon Society planners and staff members at other nature centers that we should not begin construction on the capital improvements or the design of the buildings until the Naturalist was on board. So when Bob started, it was like we were giving an artist a 700+ acre blank canvas to work with, and Bob produced a masterpiece.

He was working with the Junior League as they organized the Volunteer program. He developed the training material for the volunteers, as well as conducted the training sessions. He also developed the educational program for the schools that would be visiting the Center, and when visitors started coming out in the Spring of 1978, he was leading many of the groups.

At the same time, he was getting immersed in the actual development of the site. Trail layout and construction was in full swing, and he spent hours with our architect, Steve Olsen, who was donating his time to design the Shelter, the Front Gate and finally the Interpretive Building. In those 3 and a half years, miles of Trails were constructed, the Boardwalk at the Marsh was built along with a new Bridge across Coal Creek, and both the Shelter and the Interpretive Building were completed. The educational programs were so popular that schools were reserving time nearly a year in advance.

His great common sense and practicality were tremendous assets. He called me one afternoon to talk about obtaining railroad ties for the borders on the trails. He had called a number of sources and

we were surprised at the high prices they were asking. Then he said he had noticed that the rail line just south of Mohawk Park was being rebuilt, so he contacted the person in charge and explained our need for the ties. Bob was told that if he would gather them up and haul them off, he could have them – and that is exactly what he did!

He later learned that the Community College facility at Apache & Harvard was going to expand, and that an area of native prairie plants would be lost in the process. With the permission of the college, and the aid of some volunteers and summer workers, seeds were collected from many of these plants and were then used to establish the native prairie area north of the Interpretive Building.

When it came time to add some full time help for Bob, we were again blessed with the quality of the people who wanted to work with and for Bob. His ability to pick good people continued throughout his time as Director. These people have been exceptional, and as dedicated and unselfish with their time and talents as Bob.

Bob was an amazing man! A rare combination of skills and knowledge. Photographer, Philosopher, Scientist, Storyteller, Construction Foreman, Teacher, Manager and Friend. But to me his most amazing talent was his ability to express in writing the simple and beautiful way he perceived Nature.

When I told our oldest daughter that Bob had passed away, she reminded me of a time when she was about 5 or 6 years old. Bob was at our house, and Beth had an ear ache and wasn't feeling well. So Bob cranked up his pipe and blew the warm smoke into her ear. I don't know if it cured the ear ache, but it left a lasting memory with her, and she is now 30.

Bob gave us all a lot of good memories, and I hope that when we visit Oxley or Redbud Valley in the future, we will take a moment and say "Thank You" to this very good man. He was a blessing in the lives of all of us who knew him and got to work with him, and he was a blessing to the Community as well.

Rest in Peace, Bob, with the Assurance that you will always have our Gratitude and Appreciation.

Remarks by Tom Clark at the Celebration of Bob's Life, Sept. 20, 2004

It was on my first trip with Bob, Wally and Jim, actually the first time the four of us went birding together. January, 2002, and we were down in the tip of South Texas, around Harlingen and McAllen. Our first morning found us getting out of the rental van at Benson-Rio Grande park. Bob and Wally were standing around, Bob puffing slowly on his pipe as was his wont upon getting ready to head out on the trail. I heard some unknown birds calling from a dense stand of small trees. I asked Wally and Bob if they knew what they were. Bob shrugged and suggested I go see if I could spot them. So I eased on up to the trees, trying to locate the mystery birds. Closer and closer. Some more movement and sounds, but they were still invisible. Bob and Wally were just standing a ways off, checking out the distance with their binoculars, chatting, etc., but basically Bob was watching in his bemused way as I would creep up to try and spot these things. Finally I saw the birds--Green Jays! Large, spectacular, brilliantly colored in greens, yellow and black. My first lifer of the trip! --Later I would realize we would practically be shooing them away like sparrows, they were so common. Now he could have told me all this, but that would have spoiled it for me, wouldn't it? Bob would never just tell you what something was, he gently guided you into figuring it out for yourself, whether you were a new volunteer naturalist trainee or someone he was grooming to be a birding buddy. Even if he had seen a particular bird a hundred times, he reveled in your joy of first time discovery and relived his own through ours. Funny how some people, just like some birds, stand out in your mind.

Bob was what some folks might call lethargic; others, just easy going or contemplative. But boy, could he move when he wanted to! We had been on the hunt for a couple of days at Santa Ana NWR for the one new life bird Bob was confident he could get on this trip, a Tropical Parula warbler. We had been thwarted up to this point, with other folks saying they had just seen it "just 10 minutes ago", but we never could find it. Supposedly hanging out in a foraging group with some chickadees, titmice and nuthatches. Finally I spotted the group come into the tall trees, and the warbler was with them. A call out to Bob "Here it is, the Parula!", followed by his shout to "Keep your eyes on it!!", followed by the sound of his jingling as he hustled up the road to where we stood. Funny how he still had that set of keys, even out and away from Oxley. He was so happy, so satisfied, to see that bird. Even though it meant he had to buy the celebratory "new life bird" round of beer that night. Sometimes I would suspect that was why they invited me along, as most of the birds down there or up in Canada were life birds for me. It got to where it was much easier for Bob to rack up new Life Beers instead of Life Birds, which makes sense if you think about, 'cause there are new brews coming out all the time, but I haven't heard of any new birds being made. I think he enjoyed some of those rarer beers almost as much as the birds. But he was neither bird nor beer snob, with a mass market cream ale playing as important a role as a Cohlmia Warbler the first time he saw or tried it in order to get counted on his lists, those oh so important lists. A poor brew might be proclaimed mere slug bait, but the highest accolade he could give a worthy beer was the admonition never, ever to put a glass of it on your head, because your tongue would beat your brains out trying to get to it.

Another big bird moment was at Anzalduas Park where there was this tiny, brilliant orangey flash, flitting to the top of a post more than a football field away. "Holy shit! It's gotta be a Vermilion Flycatcher!" I had dreamed of seeing one of those for years, and just couldn't contain my excitement. Bob got a real kick out of that, chuckling at me as Jim and Wally got the scopes out. I got embarrassed then, but Bob said he, too, could remember the first times he spotted a particularly desired bird. So what special bird is he enjoying now? Labrador Duck? Carolina Parakeet? Some of you are running down names of your own, aren't you? A dodo, perhaps? Ah, a good one, for sure, but not one Bob would put on his list, and you know he was pretty particular about his lists. Because the rules of Bob's list mandate that it has to be seen in North America, on the north side of that imaginary line down the middle of the Rio Grande. Strange? Yes, but that was the rule. A striking Ivory-billed Woodpecker? A secretive Bachman's Warbler? Or the wonder of Passenger Pigeons in their vanished millions? . . . . Yeah, that's the one.

Tributes to Bob

I was tripping down memory lane with some other members of a folk music forum to which I belong this evening. Someone started a thread for people who had worked as park rangers and interpreters. I got to tripping down memory lane a bit, and decided to do a Google search for the Oxley Nature center. I was saddened to see that Bob had passed away, but warmed a bit by your request for reminiscences about him.

I was one of the first three employees of the Oxley Nature center, with Bob being one of the three. The other employee, Neil, and I were the center's first two seasonal naturalists. Back when I worked there, we had to use one of the offices in one of the Tulsa Park maintenance buildings because there was no interpretive center yet. And we taught classes in one of the Tulsa Park's pavilions in the absence of an interpretive building. We didn't mind that one little bit. In fact, it was wonderful.
Bob taught me about Newcombs Wildflower Guide. I am forever grateful to him for that. But the thing I am most grateful for is that he took a chance on me and gave me the job. Then, being, himself, only newly arrived in Oklahoma from Missouri, Bob turned me and Neil loose into the park to find out for him what was out there. That's exactly what he said, too. He said our job was to find out for him what was in the park.

I loved working for Bob, and exploring all of the new (for all three of us) kinds of life and other things that were out there. One of my favorite memories was when Bob was driving Neil and I somewhere, and he slammed on the brakes and started backing up fast. Then he stopped the car and got out. We followed him out, and saw that he was watching some birds that were floating on a pond.
Neil and I both agreed that the best kind of boss is the kind that will stop the car in the middle of the work day just to look at birds.

Because the job was seasonal, I ended up taking a job as a zookeeper at the zoo there in the park, and about a year later came back to the east coast to live. But my summer working at the Oxley Nature Center with Bob Jennings as my boss was definitely one of the best working experiences I've ever had.

Anyway, thanks for the opportunity to reminisce.

Sincerely,

Carol Dale (formerly Carol Cunningham)

P.S. I was the one who spotted and collected (with some help from Neil) the specimen of the swamp rose mallow that you, hopefully, still have in your collection there at the center. Because of his professional status, Bob was given credit though (and I don't mind that at all). But I still feel a little flush of pride that I was the first person in the history of the state of Oklahoma (according to what Bob told me, anyway) to officially collect and identify a specimen of a swamp rose mallow. Unfortunately, the grounds crew of the golf course mowed the plant down the following week. It was on the bank of the creek that formed the border between the golf course and the park, and Neil and I annoyed more than a few golfers in our efforts to collect that.

Last week (Nov. 22, 2004) we held our annual National Interpreters' Workshop in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Bob was on many peoples' minds. His name was spoken often over the week. A photo of him and a memory book was placed out where folks could record memories and messages. During the award ceremony, our NAI president Evie Kirkwood spoke highly of Bob in presenting him, posthumously, with the NAI highest award, The Fellow Award. Likewise, Lisa Brochu in her accepting remarks for Bob's award, spoke most eloquently of Bob's work with NAI and his passion for the profession. It was most moving. Bob had tremendous impact on the organization and the profession as well he did on the Center there.

You may know that before he died, Bob donated to NAI several guitars, several of his birding vests, and a pair of binoculars and requested that they be auctioned at our annual scholarship auction to raise money for this important program about which he felt so strongly. His good friend and our executive director, Tim Merriman, did the honors of auctioning the instruments and vests and each time spoke of Bob and his contributions over the years. The items brought tears, cheers, and a lot of money!

Bob will be missed, but remembered most fondly. He and I served on the national board together many years ago. I remember one instance when were doing strategic planning. The task was to come up with a mission statement. The facilitator gave some examples of other organizations' statements, such as The American Society for the Prevention of Blindness, whose mission is simply "to prevent blindness..." After a seemingly incredibly long period of time of discussing this matter and bantering back and forth on our mission statement of our organization for interpreters and interpretation, and tweaking it time and time again, Bob was standing in the back of the room, vest on, itching to move on. He finally said, "you know, I like the mission statement that was given when we first started this discussion..." The room fell silent as all eyes fell on Bob. Then he said, "to prevent blindness." The whole room cracked up! It was classic Bob. Taking a tense moment and interjecting just the perfect amount of dry humor for a needed break and get us back to reality. He was one of a kind. Yes, he is missed, but his legacy lives on.

Fred Wooley

Interpreter, Pokagon State Park, Angola, Indiana

I am a member of a guitar forum that Bob was also a member of.I just learned of his passing,and wanted to send my condolences to his family.Everyone on the forum respected Bob(Yoda) for his gentle wit and warm humor.He posted once a year or so ago that he wished he had a tape of a musical performance.I happened to have one,so I sent him a copy.He wanted to pay me,and when I told him it was not at all necessary,he offered to make me some custom tapes of music he apparently surmised I was interested in from the forum.I again declined,but I wish now I had accepted his gracious offer.Again,I'm very sorry to hear of his passing--he touched a lot of people who never even met him.

Jim Bowles

I came to know Bob through the online Acoustic Guitar Forum, formerly the Taylor Guitar Forum. There "Yoda," as he was called, always had a twinkle in his posts, as if he knew something funny that was going on that we didn't. His clever wit and unique way of expressing himself endeared him to many Forum members from around the world who never actually met him in person.
He could be serious, of course, and was quite passionate about his birds, acoustic guitars and a few other subjects. But even when that passion led to disagreement, he remained a thoughtful, well spoken friend and gentlemen.

His absence from the Forum was already missed before we heard the news of his passing, but when we heard we felt his loss more deeply. However, in a strange kind of way for people who have never met face to face, the now nearly 7,000 members of the AGF are better, more knowledgeable and caring people for his having become a warm, inspiring, all too brief part of our lives.
I join "Yoda's" many efriends in raising our computer mouses (mice? - Bob would know!) in tribute and memory of a great man!

John Cotten

Acoustic Guitar Forum Moderator

What a sad day this will be, we have lost one of the finest and most passionate members of our profession. I will mourn the premature loss of a friend who had so much still to share, but I will not spend the day in mourning. Instead I will think of all of the times shared with Bob while birding and on the NAI Board and I will celebrate and honor the life of a man who truly knew what success in life meant. Bob was a true mentor, he touched the lives of countless interpreters, and through the powerful legacy he has left behind he will continue to guide and inspire me, and so many others, for years to come. The words of Ralph Waldo Emerson seem so appropriate to Bob's life: To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you lived. This is to have succeeded.

I know of few others that succeeded in life better than Bob Jennings.

Sincerely,

John Schaust
Chief Naturalist, Wild Birds Unlimited, Carmel, IN

In this part of the world when a giant cedar crashes to the forest floor it is carved into a totem that honors all those ancestors that have come before. Those ancestors are the mentors and teachers and wise ones that stand by us, unseen, in our daily lives, and that help all of us through those tough spots in life. When I think of Bob I think of him as an ancestor, a wise one, and a teacher, and now, he is looking down on all of us, from an elevated and appropriate place in our hearts and minds. As he looks down on all of us, we know he is smiling. We look up and wish him well in his role as heaven's naturalist.

Faith Duncan and all of NAI Region 10

Bob touched lives all over this great country. Not just the Lower 48 and Alaska, but all the way out to the Far, Far West in remote Hawaii. The NAI members from this end of the USA appreciate all he has done for the profession. Hawaiians believe that departed souls travel westward seeking Ao Aumakua (realm of the ancestors). Next time I see a white tropicbird flying against the azure Hawaiian sky, I'll think of Bob on a journey to join his ancestors. Mahalo (thank you), Bob--your generous work will always be remembered. Aloha from Hawaii.

Ray Tabata, Hawaii Chair, I and T Section, NAI

I want to thank the Tulsa World for the fitting tribute to the many accomplishments of Bob Jennings, founding Director of the Oxley Nature Center, who passed away on Sept. 15th. I first met Bob in 1980. He volunteered to accompany my Ecology students on a tour of the Oxley area. Over the years we co-taught my classes on these field trips and expanded to a second trip to Red Bud Valley preserve. My students were delighted by Bob's excitement and eagerness to share his love of discovering the beauty of the natural Creation surrounding us. I often willingly took a back seat to teaching and let Bob share because he always had a special ability to draw out of the students a curiosity that made the learning experience memorable. I will miss Bob and plan to continue his legacy as best as I can in the years to come. Thanks Bob! In sincere appreciation and respect, John

John Korstad, Ph.D.
Professor of Biology and Honors Program Director
Oral Roberts University

I was one of the first full-time state park naturalists as was Donna Hamilton Horton. I was lurking around Eufaula from 1979-1990. We all had our struggles, challenges, and, other, with our nature centers, the politics and other aspects of state government. Hang with me I am getting to my main tribute point.... "Bob", I always looked up to. He was always a good listener and was not bashful about responding to requests for advice which I absorbed. He was like, "Uncle Bob" in respect to our professional relationship. He was respected by many. I was compelled to write something about him as the memories flooded me. Ah yes, I noticed Reese is a bit thinner on top and graying and Donna has lost her long hair.... Although I have my hair, I am a grey duck myself. Best to all that serve under that woodpecker in Tulsa. I still have an Oxley bird pin tucked away and every time I see a Red-Headed Woodpecker, I think of "Bob" and back in the days. God Bless.

Forrest Herters
aka Randy Ledford
Pawnee, OKy

Tulsa World Obituary

Robert Jennings' rites set; was retired Oxley director

from Tulsa World, 9/19/2004

He helped form the center and was instrumental in preserving Mohawk Park land. Robert G. "Bob" Jennings, a retired director of Oxley Nature Center, died Wednesday. He was 64.
A celebration of his life is scheduled for 12:30 p.m. Monday at Floral Haven Funeral Home Chapel in Broken Arrow.

Jennings was born Oct. 25, 1939, in Muleshoe, Texas, to Velma and Gardner Jennings.
He graduated from Wentworth Military Academy in Lexington, Mo., and served in the Navy. He later graduated with a master's degree in biology from the University of Missouri in Kansas City. Jennings went on to direct the Lakeside Nature Center, a part of the Kansas City, Mo. Parks and Recreation Department. He started an outdoor education program there.

On Sept. 15, 1977, Jennings became the first director of Oxley Nature Center, which he helped plan and build. For the next 25 years, he led Tulsans

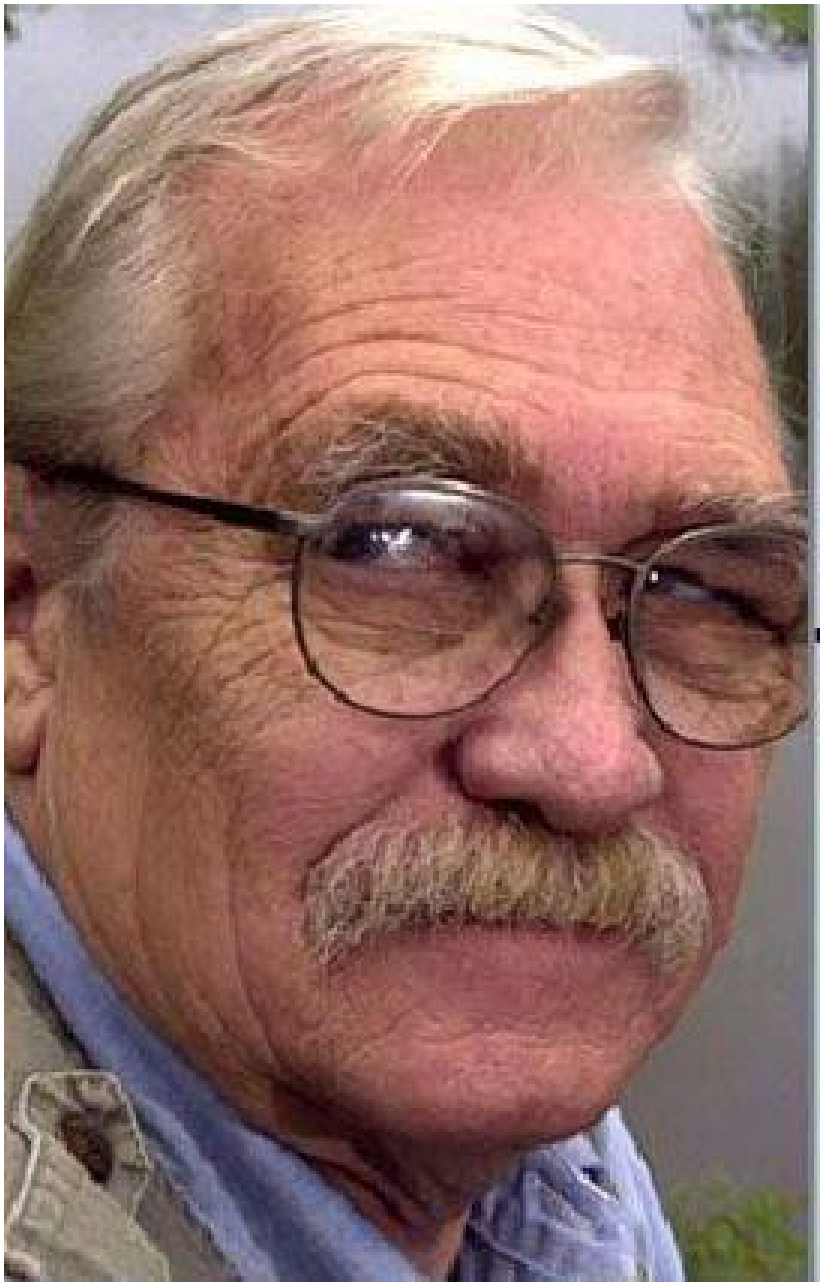
in preserving a portion of Mohawk Park, where the nature center is located. The center is nationally renowned for its interpretive programs.

In addition to his position at Oxley, Jennings also wrote "From the Stump," a column in the Oxley Nature Center Newsletter. His friends collected many of his columns and published them in a book with the same title.

Jennings recently co-authored a Midwest bird guide scheduled for release in the spring of 2005. Throughout his career, Jennings received many awards for his leadership as a naturalist and ecological interpreter.

He retired as director of Oxley Nature Center in 2002.

In 2004, he was named a Fellow of the National Association for Interpretation, the organization's highest honor.

Among his hobbies were collecting, birdwatching, genealogy, music, reading and beer-tasting. He had observed 668 birds and tasted 842 beers in his lifetime. He also enjoyed traveling to historical and bird-watching sites with his wife.

He is survived by his wife, Kathryn Lynn "Kelly" Jennings, of the home.
Friends may make memorial contributions to the National Association for Interpretation in Fort Collins, Colo., or the Mary K. Oxley Nature Center Association.