



Robert Elliott Johnston

April 16, 1942 – December 20, 2014

Robert E. Johnston died at age 72 in Ithaca of complications from treatments for lymphoma. Bob was born in Philadelphia, graduated from Dartmouth College in 1964, and received his Ph.D. in Behavioral and Neural Sciences from the Rockefeller University in 1970. He and his wife Joan immediately moved to Ithaca, Bob joining the faculty of the Psychology Department at Cornell University where he remained for his entire professional career. A gregarious hermit and trendsetter completely uninterested in trends, he roamed our hallways as a looming and beneficent presence. He was instrumental in creating and maintaining the animal behavior program in Psychology at Cornell.

Bob was an unfailingly kind colleague and mentor, steadily productive in his research at Cornell for over 40 years. He published more than 135 articles and chapters but, because he took little interest in keeping track of such things, their exact number is not clear. What is clear is that his research influenced generations of students and stimulated research around the world. His love of natural history was always apparent. After his death we found a note in his office that read: “Retirement plans: find a new species and study it in the field.”

Bob’s central research area was olfactory communication in mammals but his interests were broad and included social recognition (individual, kin, species, and sexual recognition), the neural and hormonal substrates of olfactory behavior, central nervous system mechanisms of social recognition and memory, sexual behavior, and scent marking. He was a worldwide expert on the vomeronasal system of mammals. Bob was a strong advocate of integrative, comparative, and evolutionary approaches, and worked in the laboratory and in the field – with Joan in Turkey and neighboring Dagestan. They both enjoyed extensive animal tourism in Australia, Africa, Madagascar, China, and South America. Bob also studied a panoply of animals: Golden hamsters (see photo above), Djungarian hamsters, meadow voles, Belding’s ground squirrels, Central American white-throated magpie-jays, and even people.

Indeed, many of us regard his most influential paper to be a 1979 “field study” with then-colleague Robert Kraut. They studied, among other things, the facial emotions of bowlers,

including members of the psychology department, at the Helen Newman Lanes on campus. The research question was whether emotional reactions to bowling's successes or embarrassments could be read on the bowler's face immediately when still facing the pins or afterwards when turning to face the other bowlers. Results were clear: faces only registered emotion when individuals turned around and approached their friends, strong evidence that emotions shown on the face exist in service of social communication, and are not a simple spillover from the bowler's emotional evaluation of the event. To bowl alone is to bowl deadpan. This study became an important element in our current understanding of the function of emotion and emotional expression in a research thread tracing back to Darwin's *Expression of emotions in man and animals*. Alas, and perhaps all too predictably, the research also managed to win Senator William Proxmire's Golden Fleece Award.

In addition to being a distinguished scientist, Bob also was a talented artist, excelling in photography, wood sculpture, and oil painting. He also was a stunning athlete – squash (Western New York State champion), basketball, skiing, ice skating – as well as an accomplished dancer. He trained many of us in the Texas Two-Step, the Cotton-Eyed Joe, and the Boot Scootin' Boogie. He is survived by his wife Joan and two sons, and is sorely missed by his colleagues and friends.

James E. Cutting, chair; Elizabeth Adkins-Regan, Barbara L. Finlay