

Obituary

Jerry (Gerald Richard) Olsen (1948–2021)

Teacher, lecturer, raptor biologist



Readers of *Corella* will be familiar with the name Jerry Olsen, going back to Volume 2 issue 1 (March 1978) and appearing regularly until the final issue (Vol. 44) of 2020. A quick count reveals 25 papers on raptors and owls, and a review of a popular raptor photographic book, in *Corella* alone. His tens of papers on the ecology of most of the raptors and owls of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and elsewhere appeared in other peer-reviewed journals too, including *Emu*, *Wildlife Research*, *Journal of Raptor Research* and *Australian Field Ornithology*, along with many items in *Canberra Bird Notes* and *Boobook*, the newsletter of the BirdLife Australia Raptor Group (BARG).

Jerry died suddenly in tragic and unforeseen circumstances (an aneurysm and serious fall) on 31 January 2021, having previously survived a fall on a cliff while banding Peregrine Falcons. He was an expatriate American who migrated to South Australia (Port Augusta) in the 1970s to be a primary-school teacher and tutor of disadvantaged children. In his youth in the USA he was a keen falconer, and he transferred those skills to rescue injured and captive ('pet') raptors and train them for release. While in South Australia, still in the DDT era, he formed a raptor monitoring program to investigate the raptors nesting on the cliffs and in the valleys of the Flinders Ranges and this activity spread, through colleagues, to other areas, such as Kangaroo Island.

Jerry had gained a Bachelor of Arts in Washington State (USA), and he moved from Port Augusta to Canberra in 1975 to finish a Bachelor of Science in zoology at the Australian National University while he simultaneously taught in schools. He then gained a Master of Education and lectured in education at what became the University of Canberra. He also undertook a Masters degree on Peregrine Falcons through the University of New England under our mutual supervisor Professor Peter Jarman. After retirement, Jerry continued as an adjunct (an honorary position) in the Institute for Applied Ecology at the University of Canberra, and with his raptor research and writing.

Much of the background to Jerry's early years and his time in Australia can be found in his books on his 'raptor life' (1994), owls (2011) and diurnal raptors (2014), highly recommended as engaging reading. He also wrote a raptor rehabilitation manual (1990).

Sometime around the 1990s, Jerry felt he was being excluded from some of the high-end Australian bird journals. So he began his 'test' of the perceived situation by asking me to co-author some of his papers, sometimes even as first author, in return for helping to organise data and draft or edit some text. Much of that 'test' involved papers duly published in *Corella*. This progressed quite rightly to Jerry being senior author on many papers featuring his fieldwork and data collection. More of Jerry's papers, in preparation when he died, will be finished by colleagues.

Jerry contributed enormously to the understanding of Australian raptors and owls, and to that of some on islands in the region (Solomon Islands, Lesser Sundas), including discovery of a new *Ninox* owl species on Sumba. Jerry was one of the most prominent raptor researchers, conservationists, rehabilitators and defenders in Australia. He was a mentor to, and supervisor of students, a collaborator on raptor projects, and a passionate advocate of raptor science and conservation. He had a healthy scepticism for some of the old dogma or folklore on Australian raptors, busted a few myths on them, and was keen on robust but friendly scientific debate, which he found wanting in Australian raptor biology.

Jerry described himself as a 'Peregrine person', something he felt others did not realise, although much of his research attention in recent times was focused on some lesser-known species as well (e.g. Black-shouldered Kite, Whistling Kite, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Collared Sparrowhawk, Nankeen Kestrel, Australian Hobby, Southern Boobook, as well as species on Sumba). Lately he became a devotee of radio- and satellite-tracking, with transmitters on a Swamp Harrier, Wedge-tailed and Little Eagles, and Boobooks. His enormous contribution to knowledge of Australian raptors and owls (far too many papers to list here) is available on ResearchGate, and many are cited in his books (Olsen 2011 and 2014).

I thank Penny Olsen and Terry Dennis for providing much of the early background on Jerry. I also acknowledge that the material herein is derived from tributes in *Boobook* (forthcoming), *Australian Field Ornithology* and *Canberra Bird Notes* (Debus 2021a, b). Jerry is survived by his partner Sue Trost, his two children and four grandchildren.

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