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In Memoriam

Henry S. Fitch

(1909-2009)

Galen L. Pittman¹ and Eugene A. Young²

¹*Kansas Biological Survey, 2041 Constant Avenue, Lawrence, KS 66047 (gpittman@ku.edu)*

²*Agriculture and Natural Science Department, Northern Oklahoma College, 1220 E. Grand,
PO Box 310, Tonkawa, OK 74653-0310 (Eugene.Young@north-ok.edu).*

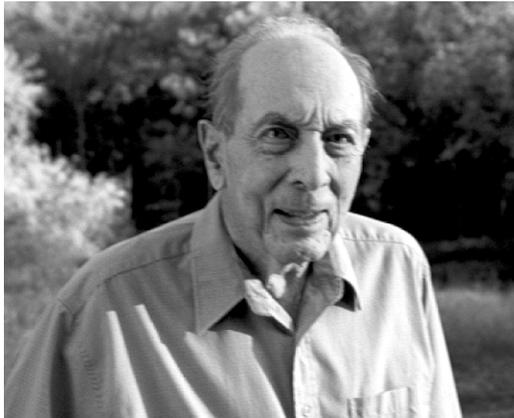


Photo courtesy of Aaron Delesie/Kansas Alumni Magazine (Hill, 2002).

Henry S. Fitch died on 8 September 2009, a couple of months shy of his 100th birthday (25 December 1909). He was a world renowned herpetologist and a charter member of the Kansas Ornithological Society. He has been referred to as the “father of snake ecology” (for remembrances of his colleagues and friends see *Herpetological Review* (2009), 40(4):393-400. For a detailed biography see Echelle and Stewart (2000). And finally for a warm and insightful article about the impact that Henry’s career had on the science of ecology, see Steven Hill’s article in the *Kansas Alumni Magazine* (2002).

Henry came to Lawrence and the University of Kansas in 1948 when he took the job as the superintendent of the newly instituted Natural History Reservation and as a KU professor of Ecology. He lived on the Reservation with his family starting in 1950 when the residence was completed. He and his wife Virginia lived on the Reservation (renamed in honor of the Fitch family in 1986, Fitch Natural History Reservation, FNHR) until her passing in 2002.

Henry continued on at the FNHR until 2006 when failing health forced him to move to Stillwater, Oklahoma, and live with his daughter, Alice and her husband. After the Reservation itself was named to honor the entire family (including the three children: John, Alice, and Chester) a new public nature trail was established and dedicated as the Henry S. Fitch Nature Trail in 1996. This trail was laid out personally by Henry (at the age of 86), and includes a relatively flat section called "Biology Trail" that Henry used for University class field trips dating back to the 1950s. But in tribute to the legendary energy and stamina that he possessed, which "anyone, of any age", who ever tried to keep up with him in the field can attest the upper loop of the trail ascends and descends at least 150 feet of elevation in its 1.3 mile length. There are thirteen points of interest along the trail and well over 100 identified and labeled woody plants for anyone who might want to literally follow in Henry's footsteps to study and enjoy nature as he once did for almost 60 years.

Henry was not much on serving as an officer or board member of the many scientific organizations that he was a member of, but rather as a zealously dedicated field naturalist, educator, and publisher of his field research. He gave talks, lectures, and nature hikes to literally thousands of children, students, and adults. He was the major advisor for 18 masters and 14 doctoral students at KU. Henry was a participant on 39 Lawrence Christmas Bird Counts between 1948 and 1989. He authored or coauthored nearly 200 scientific articles totaling over 4,000 pages on the ecology and the natural history of scores of species of snakes, lizards, turtles, frogs, birds, and mammals, as well as insects, spiders, mollusks, and even a hand full of articles involving forest and grassland succession. His publishing career spanned 73 years from 1933-2006, including one book (Fitch, 1998) on a Kansas snake community spanning over 50 years of research which summarized 32,160 capture records for 18 snake species that occurred on the FNHR. He published four articles in the KOS Bulletin as well as a dozen others that involved birds. He worked on the ecology of these animals primarily at the FNHR, in the Neotropics between Mexico and Ecuador, and several western states before coming to Kansas.

Henry's first scientific publication he co-authored with J. O. Stevenson (lead author) was in 1933: Bird notes from southwestern Oregon, (*Condor* 35:167-168). By the time he had come to Kansas to work at KU he had published 37 articles on rattlesnakes, garter snakes, gopher snakes, alligator lizards, fence lizards, frogs, skinks, ground squirrels, cottontail rabbits, coyotes, and birds. Among those articles were five reporting on the ecology of Great Horned Owls, Cooper's Hawks, and Red-tailed Hawks, and several other species (*Condor*, 42:73-75, 48:205-237, and 49:137-151; *Auk*, 66:368-369; and *California Fish and Game*, 32:144-154; see references).

Henry's four articles in the KOS Bulletin are as follows:

Fitch, H.S. and P. von Achen. 1973. Yellow-billed Cuckoo nesting at University of Kansas Natural History Reservation. 24(2):12-15. This manuscript described the impacts of fire prevention on plant succession and the effects on cuckoo populations over a 25 year period. They provided detailed accounts of nesting phenology, preferred habitat, nest building, incubation periods, chick growth, parental care, and depredation.

Fitch, H.S., H.A. Stephens, and R.O. Bare. 1973. Road counts of hawks in Kansas. 24(4):33-35. Together they document the number of hawks observed from three data sets during a period of 1950 through 1963 covering an astounding 35,872 miles.

Fitch, H.S. 1999. A half century of change in a Kansan avian community. 50(3):33-36. Dr. Fitch provided information on population fluctuations as a result of changes in plant succession from 1948 through 1998 on the FNHR.

Fitch, H.S., P. von Achen, and G.L. Pittman. 2003. Probable succession-related prey changes of Long-eared Owls in Kansas. 54(3):42-43. This was an interesting comparison of prey from pellet collections in 1951 and 2003.

Several additional papers related to birds in Kansas are worth mentioning here. Four dealt with the breeding biology of four different species and the last is a compilation of the natural history of all of the vertebrate animals of the FNHR:

Fitch, H.S. and V.R. Fitch. 1955. Observations on the Summer Tanager in northeastern Kansas. *Wilson Bulletin* 67(1):45-54.

Fitch, H. S. 1963. Observations on the Mississippi Kite in southwestern Kansas. University of Kansas publications, Museum of Natural History 12(11):503-519.

Fitch, H.S. 1974. Observations on the food and nesting of the Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*) in northeastern Kansas. *Condor* 76(3):331-333.

Fitch, H.S. and R.O. Bare. 1978. A field study of the Red-tailed Hawk in eastern Kansas. *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* 81(1):1-13.

Fitch, H.S. 1958. Home ranges, territories, and seasonal movements of vertebrates of the Natural History Reservation. University of Kansas Publications, Museum of Natural History 11(3):63-326. This monograph treats 237 species of vertebrates and has species accounts for 167 species of birds all from just one square mile of land.

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ALLOPARENTING BY A PINE SISKIN

Thomas G. Shane

Observations of adult birds feeding young of another species are not uncommon; however, cases involving the family Fringillidae are not frequent. Observations made in Kansas include a female House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) feeding three fledgling Eastern Kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) (Fitch 1949) and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers (*Tyrannus forficatus*) feeding the nestlings of a Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) pair only a meter from their own nest with young (Lowther 1975). Shy (1982) reports 140 cases of interspecific feeding in birds with 65 adopting species from 22 families. Nestlings were fed in 72% of these observations, 25% of the time fledglings were observed being fed, while age was not specified in 3% of the records (Shy 1982). Brown (1987) refers to this behavior as “interspecific alloparenting” by mistake. The most extreme case of interspecific feeding was recorded in the photo taken by Paul Lemmons of a male Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) feeding several goldfish (*Carassius auratus*) in a garden pond (Welty 1975).

On 15 May 2008 between 0916 and 0919 hrs in my backyard (Garden City, Kansas), I observed a fledgling House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) begging to an adult Pine Siskin (*Carduelis pinus*) while on the ground below a feeder complex. The Pine Siskin then fed the

young House Finch. A second House Finch fledgling flew into the area and also started begging with the same typical “fluttering-wing” behavior. Both young House Finches had the typical pair of downy “horns.” The adult Pine Siskin, a fairly dark individual, resumed foraging for about a minute. It then fed the second House Finch fledgling followed by a second feeding of the first young bird. The siskin then returned to foraging on the ground; however, all three birds flew into the trees before a third feeding could be observed. During late morning on 17 May 2008, I observed a fledgling House Finch begging to a dark Pine Siskin (presumably the same adult observed on 15 May) in a tree in the front yard. The two birds then flew to the back of the tree where no further observations could be made.

Skutch (1961) states, “...it is probable that most of the birds of unknown status that were found feeding the young of some other species were, or recently had been, engaged in reproduction” and describes them as breeding unilateral interspecific helpers. He reports one case of a Fringillidae species feeding young of another Fringillidae species. Shy (1982) reported six cases of bird species of other families feeding Fringillidae young.

The winter of 2008 can be classified as a good Pine Siskin invasion year. A peak period occurred with numbers counted or estimated in the yard that ranged from 100 to 300 siskins from 21 January through 17 March (n=18 days). After that period, numbers generally never exceeded 40 siskins through 25 May. On 26 May through 13 June fledglings and or juvenile Pine Siskins could be observed with the adults (n= 6 days). The possibility of a Pine Siskin that had recently been engaged in nesting was possible allowing for the alloparenting behavior. The loss of one or both House Finch parents was plausible because of a rampant eye infection disease (conjunctivitis) going through the local population. An additional scenario could include egg dumping by a female House Finch. Intraspecific egg dumping by House Finches has been suspected, but no interspecific cases have been reported (Hill 1993).

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1706 Belmont, Garden City, Kansas. tom.shane@sbcglobal.net