

Class of 1961 alumnus debunks 'bird brain' phrase

by Natalie Johnson - Friday, May 13, 2011

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/12155/class-of-1961-alumnus-debunks-the-phrase-bird-brain/>

As a child growing up, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh alumnus Russell Balda '61, took to closely watching the birds that lived in a nearby park and on a farm across the street from his house in Oshkosh.

“I noticed early on that the birds living on the farmland were different from the birds living in South Park,” Balda said. “I was especially curious about the differences in their songs.”

Soon, he was comparing the birds with pictures in books at the local library; and a lifelong passion took flight.

But when Balda first stepped foot on the Wisconsin State College at Oshkosh (as UWO was known at the time), he had no idea that he could turn his boyhood passion for birds into a career.

Instead, he planned to major in history and political science and teach high school.

“The pivotal day in my life occurred when Professor Jacob Shapiro described all the areas of study and subdivisions of zoology,” he said. “I nearly fell out of my chair when he listed ecology and ornithology. I followed him back to his office after class like a frisky puppy. I was astonished to find out one could actually earn a living as a professional ecologist/ornithology.”

From that day on, there was no turning back for Balda, who went on to earn a bachelor's degree in biology from UWO and a master's degree and a doctorate in zoology and ecology, respectively, from the University of Illinois.

“Drs. Shapiro, Reed, Palm and Unger were superb instructors, motivators and councilors,” he said. “I was well-prepared for the rigors of academic life at the graduate level. As a teaching assistant, I was very comfortable in the classroom and laboratory. I never felt I had been let down by my education at Oshkosh.”

Today, as a Regents' Professor of Biology at Northern Arizona University, Balda is one of the foremost experts on the pinyon jay, a highly social, seed-caching bird found in the western and southwestern U.S.

“My research on pinyon jays began as a study of their natural history and ecology as they were a little known species in the 1960s,” he said. “Some basic findings include their colonial nesting habits, permanent flock structure and seed caching and recovery behaviors.”

This work led to a large number of studies in collaboration with professional colleague Al Kamil and many students about the pinyon jay's spatial and social cognitive attributes. Next, they conducted a series of comparative studies involving closely related species, such as Scrub jays, Mexican jays and Clark's nutcrackers.

“Over the years, we amassed a large body of knowledge on avian cognition and certainly debunked the phrase ‘bird brain,’” he explained. “Our studies revealed that these species had highly developed mental capabilities in select areas.”

Balda’s work has earned him many honors and awards, including the William Brewster Memorial Award from the American Ornithological Society; and the Miller Award from the Cooper Ornithological Society.

These days, Balda and his wife, Judith, are passionate about their roles as associate proprietors of Javelina Leap, a vineyard and winery in Cottonwood, Ariz.

Although they couldn’t make it back to UW Oshkosh for the Class of 1961’s Golden Titan reunion this weekend, the couple does enjoy attending UWO Arizona Alumni Chapter events each year.

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