

PRAIRIE ZEPHYR

Newsletter of the Southern Plains Network

September 2022

Remembering Rob Bennetts

Rob Bennetts, who served as the Southern Plains Inventory and Monitoring Network (SOPN) program manager from June 2007 through December 2017, passed away on June 14, 2022 at his home in Model, Colorado after an illness. Rob worked for the National Park Service Inventory and Monitoring Division (IMD) in multiple roles for more than 15 years, and retired at the end of March 2019. Rob's career in conservation biology and ecology spanned more than 35 years. In addition to his time with the NPS, Rob also held positions with the Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat in Arles, France, the US Geological Survey—Florida Integrated Science Center, and various research positions associated with universities.

Rob was a greatly admired and valued member of the IMD team and was known for his visionary work developing collaborative teams to better monitor and manage park resources, for his design and implementation of monitoring protocols, and his role in the development of the concept of management assessment points.

Rob was a dedicated bird conservationist, devoted collaborator, and beloved friend and colleague. He lived and worked all over the world, including in California, Montana, Florida, France, New Mexico, and Colorado, and spent the last 13 years of his life living on the Great Plains where he was surrounded by birds, including kestrels and orioles, swift foxes, and native grasses and wildflowers.

Rob grew up in southern California and became enamored with the natural world at an early age. According to his brother Rich Bennetts, Rob regularly came home with insects and skeletons during his boyhood. In the late 1970s, he was a fire crew supervisor and smoke jumper in California. He then obtained his BA (with honors) in Zoology and Wildlife Biology from the University of Montana, Missoula in 1985, a Master of Science in Wildlife Biology from Colorado State University in 1991,



In Memorium

and a PhD from the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, University of Florida in 1998. He joined the NPS Inventory and Monitoring Division in 2003.

Even after his passing, Rob still is bringing people together. By writing their remembrances of Rob, his friends and coworkers have virtually gathered to share personal memories and recall his contributions to natural resource management and conservation, the Everglades, the NPS Inventory and Monitoring Division, the Southern Plains and Greater Yellowstone networks, the Southwest Network Collaboration, and the NPS Collaboration Network. This memorial issue of *Prairie Zephyr* was written through a collaborative effort—an outcome of which Rob would have been proud.

Snail Kite Research in the Florida Everglades

Between 1986 and 2003, Rob worked in various capacities on Snail Kite conservation, while contributing greatly to the understanding of central and south Florida ecosystem ecology, including foundational concepts informing the multi-billion dollar, decades-long Everglades restoration.

During this interval, Rob obtained his Master's degree from Colorado State University in 1991. There he began his career-long emphasis on quantitative aspects of wildlife movements and demography during his Master's research on the influence of dwarf mistletoe infestations on bird communities in Colorado. Rob also worked in France with the Station Biologique de la Tour du Valat between 1998 and 2000, where he coordinated their long-term research and monitoring program.

In Florida, Rob is best known for his body of work on the interconnectedness between Snail Kites, Florida apple snails (the kite's nearly exclusive prey), and hydrology. In 1988, Rob was first author on a [comprehensive report on Snail Kite nesting](#)¹ in the Everglades that influenced Snail Kite and apple snail research and monitoring for another 20 years.

For his PhD research at the University of Florida, Rob designed and executed one of the largest projects, in terms of scale and scope, on a single species in Florida. In a three-year period, he accomplished the incredible feat of radio-tagging 300 Snail Kites (most often using a net-gun, sometimes from a moving airboat while he was driving it!). The radio-tracking data revealed novel information on the extensive movements, exploratory behavior, and survival patterns of Snail Kites, and created a new perspective on the scale at which kites successfully navigate wetlands spread over 8,000 square miles. This project's [final report](#)², which was founded in Rob's dissertation work, described sampling protocols and analyses that continue to be used for Snail Kite research and monitoring to this day.



Rob with Phil Darby (top) and Patty Valentine-Darby (bottom) after capturing Snail Kites in the Everglades in the early 1990s. Rob and his assistants took measurements and blood samples from the birds and fitted them with radio transmitters. Photos courtesy of Patty Valentine-Darby.

1 Bennetts, R.E., M.W. Collopy, S.R. Beissinger. 1988. Nesting ecology of Snail Kites in Water Conservation Area 3A. Prepared for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District, by Florida Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, Gainesville, Florida.

2 Bennetts, R.E., and W.M. Kitchens. 1997. The demography and movements of Snail Kites in Florida. USGS Biological Resources Division, Florida Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit. Tech. Rep. No. 56.

In Memorium

In all, Rob was author or coauthor on 22 published papers on kites (plus three book chapters), and five on apple snails. Although his formal involvement in Snail Kite and apple snail research ended in the mid-2000s, his contribution to changing the way researchers and conservationists think about kites and snails in the context of central and south Florida wetlands continues today, and certainly will continue for years to come.

Rob was a supervisor, mentor, collaborator, and friend. We met him in 1993 when we took positions with the University of Florida to help with the monitoring and research study of endangered Snail Kites that included Rob's dissertation research. The project included helping Rob monitor banded and radio-tagged kites throughout central and south Florida wetlands, and assisting with nest monitoring, foraging studies, annual counts, and radio-tagging kites. It also began what would be a nearly 30-year professional relationship and friendship. Our experience working in wetlands from Orlando south to Miami remains one of the highlights of our careers and instilled in us a respect for what it takes to apply scientific rigor to inform natural resource conservation.

We remember Rob as a skilled field ecologist, an influential scientist/writer, a good friend, an excellent cook, and a person who had a knack for finding the perfect setting in which to live. He was also a big-picture thinker who had the ability to effectively communicate the picture to others. Rob's skill in capturing Snail Kites with a net gun while driving the airboat was something to behold and has yet to be repeated. Rob was very generous in his sharing of data to include first-authorship for students and field staff as he mentored their careers. He was also generous in his support of Florida apple snail work and of Phil eventually pursuing his doctoral research on apple snails.

Our visits with Rob over the nearly 20 years he most recently lived out West were for us a destination vacation. He lived in beautiful settings where his favorite neighbors were birds and other wildlife that frequented his yard and his surroundings. Through visits to Rob's, our son gained an appreciation for the country, wildlife, and the value of friendship. In classic Rob fashion, when our son was born, Rob gave us a Bourdeaux, Chateau Latour, that would age perfectly by the time our son would grow up and could appreciate it.

There's so much more we could say about Rob, and what an honor it was to work with and know him, but we'll end with one of Phil and Rob's favorite collaborations—menu planning, shopping, and cooking for family and friends. Rob was an ambitious cook and he loved learning and experimenting in cooking to the same degree he loved applying science to solving natural resource challenges. Like so many others, we will miss him immensely.

Phil Darby, Professor, University of West Florida, Department of Biology

Patty Valentine-Darby, Science Communication Specialist and Writer-Editor, Natural Resource Condition Assessment Program and Chihuahuan Desert Network, Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative



Rob using a jewelry drill to mark a number into a Florida tree snail's shell (top) in Big Cypress National Preserve. Photo courtesy of Patty Valentine-Darby. Rob on an airboat in a South Florida wetland (bottom). Photo courtesy of Dave Hallac.

In Memorium

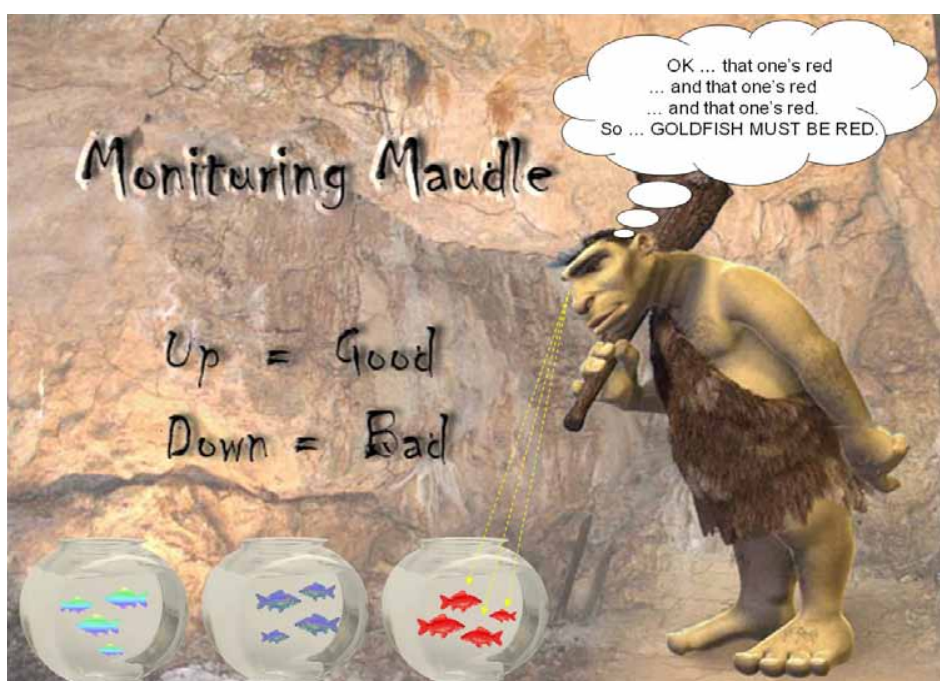
Inventory and Monitoring Division

Rob joined IMD in 2003, first as the lead ecologist for the Greater Yellowstone Network (GRYN) before becoming the program manager of the Southern Plains Network in 2007. During his time with IMD, Rob also assisted other networks and helped develop the Southwest Network Collaboration (consisting of the Southern Plains Network, Chihuahuan Desert Network, and the Sonoran Desert Network).

Rob was also highly involved with the evolution and advancement of two interrelated concepts that played an important role in the development and maturation of IMD monitoring programs. [Integration of science and management](#) is essential in making sure that networks provide information that park managers can use to make science-based decisions to preserve and protect park resources. [Management assessment points](#) are a tool used in adaptive management that helps identify when managers need to carefully assess the data related to the condition of resources to ensure that the level of risk to a resource remains within acceptable levels.

The significance of Rob Bennett's contributions to the formative years of the NPS Inventory and Monitoring (I&M) Program at the local park, regional, and national levels cannot be overestimated. I had the great pleasure of working with Rob as his supervisor for nearly a decade. During that time I witnessed Rob's growth and evolution, from an ecologist wanting to contribute to the formulation of a network vision for future monitoring, to program manager who easily took to the challenges of defining and leading a vision that would serve parks within and beyond the Southern Plains. Along the way Rob engaged and contributed significantly to the I&M program and associated efforts service-wide, including invasive species, fire monitoring, and cultural resources.

Monitoring programs serve to inform those making key decisions about the management and desired outcomes for natural and cultural resources. Relevance and clear communication with managers continues to be critical to the success of the I&M program. Rob, along with some other Intermountain Region network program managers, well understood this and worked collaboratively to integrate inventory, research, and monitoring results into resource management decision making. Early on in the program, Rob became part of a small group of outstanding network leaders who helped take the lead in working with managers to define methods and products that would be most useful and applicable to management decision making. While this small group built momentum, Rob stood out with a special talent for graphically capturing and communicating scientific results and their management



Several of Rob's former colleagues remarked about his love of graphics and the clever illustrations that he created for presentations. This graphic was part of his presentation "[Integration of science and management: What does it mean?](#)" at the 2007 George Wright Society meeting.

In Memorium

relevance. Over the years this talent and skill became well known and sought after.

Rob was a curious and creative problem-solver. His passion and honesty were ever present in each new undertaking. His persistence sometimes challenged his peers and supervisor but his willingness to communicate, collaborate, and to listen to the opinions of others could alter his perspective and always resulted in the best possible outcomes. He respected his colleagues and peers and always valued theirs in return.

As his supervisor or as his friend, visits with Rob most often meant stimulating and educational conversation, often accompanied by excellent food and drink. I always looked forward to our interactions. Even when we were faced with challenging issues that required clear communication and patience for resolution. I am one of so very many who will continue to miss Rob Bennetts during the years ahead.

Bruce Bingham, I&M Program (2003 to 2014)



Rob with panoramic camera used for viewshed analysis for the Bent's Old Fort NHS Natural Resource Condition Assessment (NRCA). Photo by Kim Struthers.

When I think of Rob, the first word that comes to mind is generosity. He was generous with his time, his praise, his encouragement, and his knowledge. Rob's passion for encouraging collaboration and sharing among people, parks, and across disciplines—as we all work towards a common goal—was simply a reflection of his generous nature. Another trait I remember is Rob's love of graphics! He made his ideas come alive through often wildly imaginative diagrams and illustrations that conveyed more than text ever could.

Farewell, Rob! We miss you.

Margaret Beer, Communication Specialist, Inventory and Monitoring Division (retired)

Rob Bennetts was one of the most brilliant people I have ever known. He was one of my most trusted advisors as I was setting up and managing the 32 networks of parks in the NPS Inventory and Monitoring Program because he had an uncanny combination of street smarts, book learning, and knowledge of people dynamics. When I ran into roadblocks and difficult issues as we were getting the I&M networks off the ground, Rob was one of the first people I called for advice on how to solve the problem.

In 2012, when I was asked to write the lead chapter on how to implement a successful long-term natural resource monitoring program for the book *Design and Analysis of Long-term Ecological Monitoring Studies*, I called Rob and asked if he would be my coauthor. He had some great ideas on how to take all of the lessons learned from getting the NPS I&M Program off the ground and making it successful, and organizing what we had learned into a “how-to” chapter on the key elements for a successful long-term program.

While we were writing that chapter, I visited him at his house in New Mexico and he cooked up a gourmet French meal that I still remember. “It's all about the sauce,” he told me. I will always have great memories of my good friend and a brilliant scientist, Rob Bennetts.

Dr. Steve Fancy, Former Chief, Inventory and Monitoring Division (now retired, living in Florida and Hawaii)

In Memorium

Rob Bennetts was my great friend and colleague. We first met almost 20 years ago when Rob was the Quantitative Ecologist for the NPS Greater Yellowstone Network, and immediately began working together on research and monitoring efforts and a broader effort to better integrate science into park resource protection. Rob was a visionary scientist committed to serving the NPS mission, playing a central role in the Rio Rico and Chico workshops that set much of the foundation for science support for park management, innovative science communication tools such as the Science of the American Southwest web portal, and a founding member of the Southwest Network Collaboration, a unique partnership that serves 29 parks.

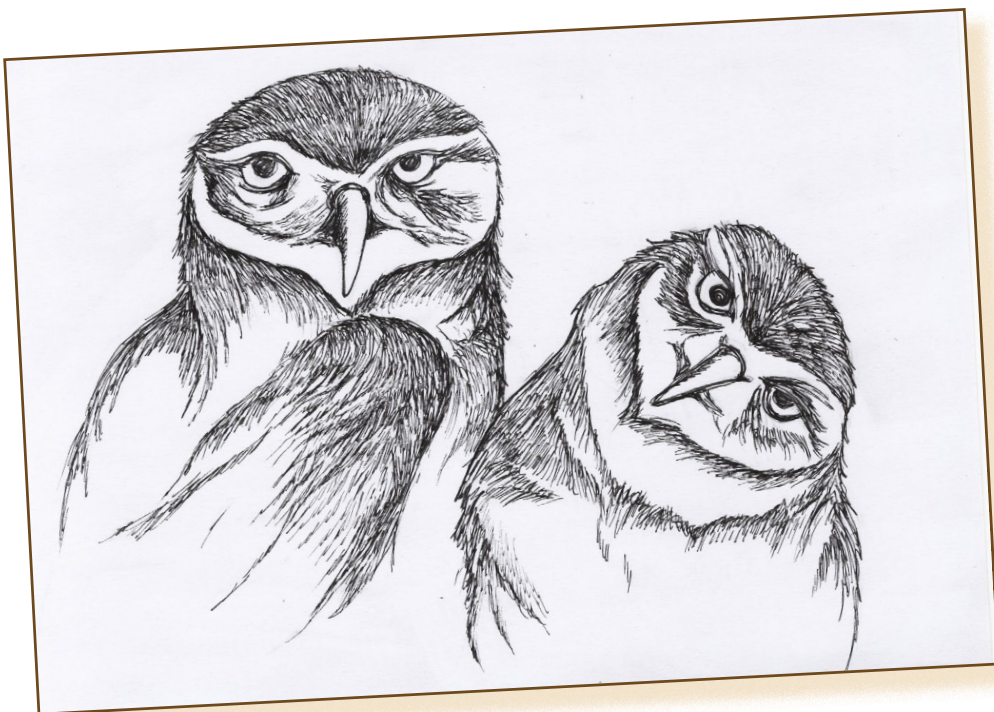
Rob's scientific excellence and dedication to resource protection were matched with a big heart, quick wit, and zest for life. I will remember his booming laugh, the sparkle in his eye, and big smile while he recounted a favorite story, described one of his trips with his family or latest bird sighting, discussed ecological research over a glass of wine or scotch, or while cooking us one of his legendary meals. I miss my friend, but am comforted in knowing he lived a good and meaningful life on his own terms.

Andy Hubbard, Sonoran Desert Program Manager

Greater Yellowstone Inventory and Monitoring Network

Rob was the lead ecologist for the Greater Yellowstone Network (GRYN) from August 2003 until June 2007. Throughout his tenure, Rob was responsible for the scientific oversight of the network's multiple monitoring programs for Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, Grand Teton National Park, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Memorial Parkway, and Yellowstone National Park. In particular, Rob was deeply involved in finalizing the whitebark pine and amphibian monitoring protocols.

Whitebark pine, a keystone conifer found in subalpine environments, was identified as an ecologically significant and socially relevant vital sign for GRYN in the early 2000s. By understanding the importance of collaboration when crafting a statistically sound protocol, Rob was instrumental in bringing together a coalition of experts from the NPS, US Forest Service, US Geological Survey, and Montana State University to form the Interagency Whitebark Pine Monitoring Working Group. Guiding the development of a monitoring protocol on an ecosystem-wide scale was no easy task, yet Rob had a gift for keeping the group unified and the protocol moving forward despite the disparate opinions and goals of the different personalities involved in



Rob's Burrowing Owls always made me smile.

Thank you, Rob, for helping me to look at things from many different angles!

*Kristin Legg,
Program Manager-Ecologist,
Greater Yellowstone Network*

Illustration by Kristin Legg

In Memorium

the process. As a result of his tireless work and dedication, the Interagency Whitebark Pine Monitoring Protocol was finalized in 2007 and this summer marked the 19th year for the Whitebark Pine Monitoring Program. This program is the only long-term monitoring program tracking the health status of whitebark pine across the more than 22 million acres that comprise the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Globally, amphibian populations have experienced significant declines because of wetland loss and other factors. In Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks, amphibians depend on limited wetland habitat, and this monitoring protocol gathers information about wetland dynamics and which amphibian species are most vulnerable to climate-driven changes. Following Rob's initiative, the GRYN amphibian monitoring program utilizes a collaborative approach to maintain this protocol and is now one of the longest-running multispecies amphibian monitoring programs in the United States. This protocol is one more example of Rob's ability to bring folks together to make something big happen.

Even after Rob moved to his new position with SOPN, he was always willing to provide support to GRYN scientists and answer questions. His willingness to bounce questions and ideas around with GRYN staff was so important to creating and maintaining their successful long-term monitoring programs.



Whitebark pine in the Wyoming Range. NPS photo by Erin Shanahan.

Rob Bennetts: a kind, intelligent, caring, interesting, charismatic, humorous, creative, and all-around good guy!

While Rob was gifted in many aspects of his work life, he was exceptional at mentoring and advocating for many of us who were fortunate enough to work with him. I met Rob in the spring of 2004 when I was hired as the crew lead for the Whitebark Pine Monitoring Program. What I most admire and am grateful for about Rob and his leadership style is that he always showed his appreciation for my work, trusted my decisions and actions, acknowledged my experiences and how those experiences would improve the protocol and program in general, and consulted me constantly throughout the development of the protocol methods. Rob invited me to the table from the first day of the monitoring program forward. And for that, I will be forever indebted.

Rob innately knew how to motivate folks and it came from a place of integrity, honesty, and kindness. And he was incredibly humble. He truly helped me find my worth and I wish I had more time with him at GRYN. To be honest, I think I would be a much better person and employee.

Erin Shanahan, Ecologist (Vegetation), Greater Yellowstone Network

In Memorium

Southern Plains Inventory and Monitoring Network

Rob served as the SOPN program manager from June 2007 through December 2017 during a critical time period for the network as monitoring protocols were finalized, a [multipark restoration project](#) was getting started, and Natural Resource Condition Assessments (NRCAs) were completed for the network's parks. The Southern Plains Network has among the smallest funding of any of the 32 IMD networks, and the majority of the parks in the network are small with limited staff sizes, making the natural resource expertise among SOPN staff especially important.

Rob's greatest legacy at SOPN was building collaborations to help the network achieve its goals and better serve network parks. One of the first collaborations that Rob helped establish was between SOPN and the Southern Plains Fire Group for a combined grassland and fire effects monitoring protocol. This effort allowed the collection of more comprehensive datasets and reduced costs and overhead while pooling limited funds to achieve statistically-desirable sample sizes.

The [vegetation management collaborations](#) developed for Washita Battlefield, Bent's Old Fort, and Sand Creek Massacre national historic sites not only assisted these parks that had gotten bogged down with complicated NEPA pathways, complex natural resource issues, and limited staffing resources, but became the heart of a new way for these parks to adaptively manage their vegetation. Rob led and facilitated a process wherein entities that sometimes had worked at cross-purposes and didn't always share their data came together to leverage the power of collaboration. Rob's visionary leadership was essential in developing this novel and intentional process for SOPN, Fire, Invasive Plant Management Teams (IPMTs), and park staff to work together to support parks and help them meet their management objectives. One of the most important elements of these collaborations was an annual project schedule for vegetation management with seasonal cycles of planning, implementation, and assessment that enabled strategic decision-making as opposed to ad hoc management.



Rob and Dr. Tim Seastedt (University of Colorado at Boulder) who assisted with grassland assessments for NRCAs in SOPN parks. Photo by Kim Struthers.



Rob was also a gifted bird photographer. Northern Harrier (left) and Rufous Hummingbird (right). Photos by Rob Bennetts.

In Memorium

Rob Bennetts and the expert SOPN team under his leadership helped the three parks of the High Plains Group (Bent's Old Fort NHS, Capulin Volcano NM, and Sand Creek Massacre NHS) establish firm foundations to support solid, science-based, adaptive management principles that would benefit the health and sustainability of the parks' natural resources systems long into the future. Rob and his team brought years of experience and expertise to their assessments of the parks' resources and assistance with long range management plans incorporating annual monitoring and adaptive response strategies. Rob's adaptive management approach was beautifully successful due to his belief in and commitment to the power of collaboration. Rob and his colleagues engaged the simple principle that the strength of many perspectives brought together, including multidisciplinary scientists and park managers alike, would benefit management decision-making, resource conditions, and visitor experiences. The Annual Natural Resources Management Strategy became the single most important management guidance designed to assist small parks with limited natural resource staff. The strategy combined the scientific expertise of multiple natural resources programs to guide parks in meeting their resource management goals within the practical contexts of competing management demands and limited staffing and budgets.

Rob had a special affinity for and understanding of small parks, and a true appreciation of prairie grasslands and their interface with riparian ecosystems. As a new park with a strong landscape-oriented mission, Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site was blessed to have Rob's guidance and involvement from early on in the park's existence. His deep understanding of the site's resources composition and trends, and his genuine ability to seek out the knowledge and opinions of others, laid the groundwork and goals for the best possible long-term management of the site's natural systems from the very start. Sand Creek is just one small example of Rob's legacy for the future of the many parks, programs, landscapes, resources and people he influenced. Besides his professional expertise, Rob was modest, funny, kind, and above all, unabashedly passionate about the natural world and "doing the right thing." He will be truly missed, but his legacy will always be present in those prairie landscapes for which he cared so much.

Alexa Roberts, former Superintendent, High Plains Group (retired)

Karl Zimmermann, former Site Manager/Natural Resources Manager, Sand Creek Massacre NHS (retired)

Fran Pannebaker, former Natural Resources Manager, Bent's Old Fort NHS (retired)

Zach Cartmell, former Natural Resources Manager, Capulin Volcano, NM (USFWS)

Rob was a wonderful man and was a pleasure to work with while he was with the Southern Plains Network. As SOPN's data manager, we worked together for several years during his time with us. I couldn't have asked for a better program manager and was glad for the time he spent with our program. I especially enjoyed our time together working on the NRCAs for our network parks. And I'll never forget how he could spin up a great PowerPoint presentation. You always know you're in for a treat when Rob breaks out his artistic talents on the screen. I only wish I could have seen him more often in person as I'm located at Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park. I know he'll be missed by many people and I'm glad to be counted as one of them.

Heidi Sosinski, Data Manager, Southern Plains Network



Rob and Fran Pannebaker (rear) during a NRCA meeting at Bent's Old Fort. Photo by Kim Struthers.

In Memorium

Rob was amazingly good at finding opportunities—opportunities for parks, network staff, and crew members. He was always looking for ways to maximize funding and for monetary resources so that the small parks in the Southern Plains Network could obtain information that they needed. Whether it was the big multipark restoration project that we did or a small inventory project for a single park, Rob always kept his eyes open for ways to help other people and parks. Rob was able to create these opportunities because he knew what the parks' needs were and he understood how to make the system work so they could get the resources that would help them reach their management objectives.

Rob always supported his staff, whether it was helping them obtain additional training or enabling their career development. He supported my detail to Hurricane Harvey recovery because he knew it was important to me. Johnny Horsley was one of our crew members early on, and Rob was able to help develop a shared position for him with Chihuahuan Desert Network so both networks could benefit from Johnny's ability to identify exotic plants. Rob supported Kaitlin O'Brien-Friesenhahn in her MS degree and her research on the impact on nonnative plant species on native bee populations in the southern Great Plains. He also supported my graduate education through a student intern program.

Rob had a genius for collaboration. He had a great ability to look at the big picture and see how different pieces could fit together to gain economies of scale. He was a forerunner in the inventory and monitoring division in building collaborations, and doing so well enough so that other programs also saw the benefits and opportunities in them and wanted to keep them going. When he retired, Rob told me that he hoped that the [vegetation management collaborations](#) would continue to be successful. He hoped that they could be a legacy of his work with the network.

Rob always believed in me more than I believed in myself. He was a friend as well as a boss. He was the best boss I've had and I had some good ones. He planned and cooked elaborate French meals when we both lived in old New Mexico when the SOPN office was there. He taught me how to enjoy foie gras and the finer points of single malt scotch. Although I no longer eat foie gras, I still put my scotch knowledge to use.

Tomye Folts-Zettner, Ecologist (retired), Southern Plains Network

I had the privilege of working with Rob during his last few years of his NPS career. Rob was one of the most creative, big-picture thinkers I ever met, with a unique vision of the ways that organizations can transcend boundaries and deconstruct internal barriers. Rob had a deep commitment to helping and supporting network parks, and



Rob and Tomye Folts-Zettner. Photo by Allyson Mathis.



In Memorium

supported his employees, coworkers, and colleagues. He had a way of providing his staff with both guidance and free reign. It was apparent that he didn't enjoy the bureaucracy part of his job, but he was very effective at it, with the ability to get things done and solve problems. Overall, he was one of the most effective managers I've ever encountered.

One of the ways that Rob stood out was his commitment to producing functional reports and plans versus just completing a document in order to complete a requirement. Rob was a great believer in science communication. He valued what communication specialists bring to IMD, and the importance of communicating monitoring results in ways that are meaningful to various audiences.

One of the first things that I worked on with Rob was the report for a [multiyear restoration project](#) that had taken place in nine parks on the southern Great Plains. Instead of just producing a report that said, "We did this, and we did that," Rob spearheaded a process that provided information on the work accomplished, but also an overview of the components of restoration projects in southern Plains grasslands. The report contained vignettes that highlighted work accomplished along with lessons learned. This was especially appropriate since one of the project's objectives was to build capacity for restoration projects in SOPN parks.

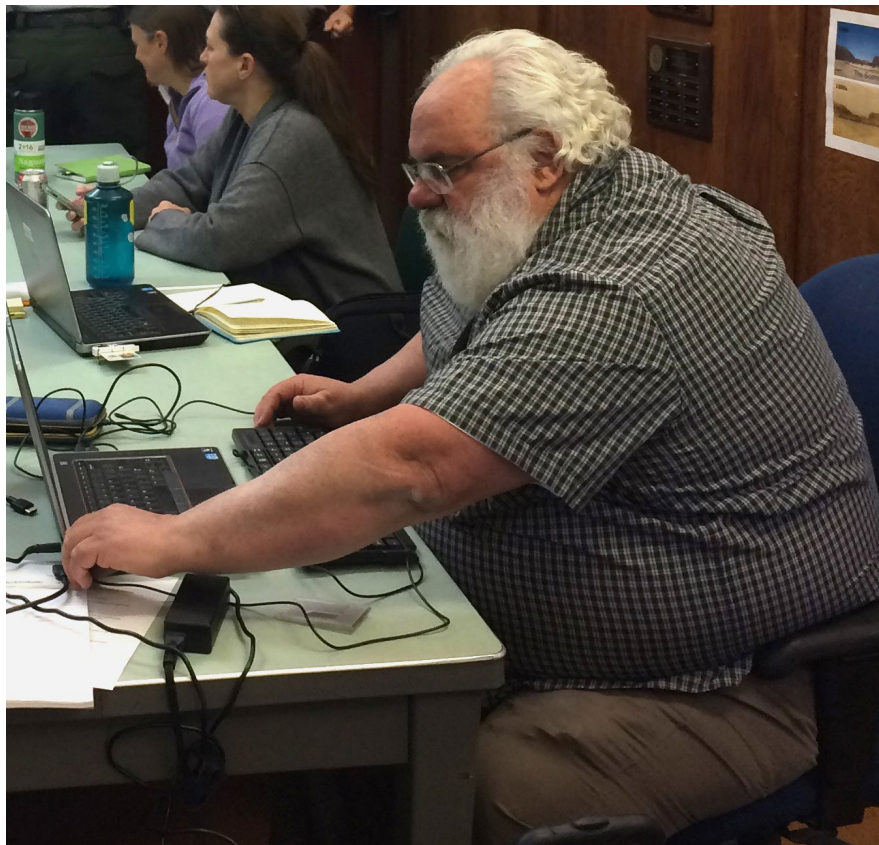
The collaborative [vegetation management plans](#) and their associated annual work plans are other good examples of living documents that Rob played an essential role in developing.

I only met Rob once in person, and didn't know him on a personal level like many others did. But I greatly respected him and miss learning from him. I hope to honor his legacy by continuing to support IMD science communication and the NPS Collaboration Network in my role as a NPS cooperator.

Allyson Mathis, SOPN Writer/Editor/Science Communication Specialist, Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative

Rob had such a brilliant mind and a joy for life. Much of what gets credited to me at Washita was really from the work that Rob did in creating a wonderful collaboration between previously "siloe'd" programs. I had no idea about the depth of life Rob had lived...and he truly lived! I will raise a glass to him, and in future collaborations, I will always try to emulate the wonderful work that he did.

Tucker Blythe, former Superintendent Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, currently Superintendent Mississippi National River and Recreation Area



In Memorium

NPS Collaboration Network

Rob spent the last 16 months of his career in an assignment with the Washington Office (WASO) focusing on fostering a more collaborative environment for resource management within the NPS and working with the NPS Collaboration Network. Rob's passionate desire for change within the NPS and the example of his career demonstrated how such internal collaboration can work and be successful. It also created the foundation for the NPS Collaboration Network, a grassroots effort to change the NPS culture. Rob played an essential role in helping to establish the group in June 2018 and was its de facto leader. He was also a major author of the group's [action plan](#).

Rob recognized that collaboration is essential to successful holistic management within the NPS and that all perspectives need to be represented to be effective in our work. His goal and the goal of the network was/is to change the culture of the NPS to one of collaboration. Rob and Terri Hogan (Invasive Plant Program Manager for the Biological Resources Division) started the process by organizing a Collaboration Clinic in Fort Collins, Colorado in March 2016.



Rob at Bent's Old Fort NHS. Photo by Kim Struthers.

Rob and other members of the network gave presentations to Guy Adema, the Deputy Associate Director of Natural Resource Stewardship and Science Directorate, to Kirsten Gallo, Chief, Inventory and Monitoring Division, and to the national NPS natural resource advisory committee. The NPS Collaboration Network focuses on internal NPS collaboration because there are many fewer resources devoted to internal relative to external collaborative efforts.

I'm so sad to lose Rob. He was a very special person. I deeply appreciated the way his mind worked and valued every moment I got to work with him. I learned a ton from our time together and it has changed the way I think and work in the NPS on cultural landscapes. I just feel really lucky to have had him as a mentor and colleague.

I'm so happy I get to continue collaboration work here in NCR based on what I learned from him. Here's to the future—and to great collaboration—as Rob would have wanted it.

Julie McGilvray, Program Manager, Preservation Services (Cultural Landscapes + Historic Structures + GIS), Regional Historical Landscape Architect, National Capital Region

Oh there is so much to say! Rob was a passionate collaborator, curious, humble, introverted (which those who have worked with him may be surprised to hear), and adventurous. He loved to cook, and although I considered him to be a chef, he adamantly refuted that title. He loved peace and solitude surrounded by nature, surrounded by birds. His choice of a home was no accident. He searched for a rolling open landscape with long views that he found in the piedmont plains and tablelands of southeastern Colorado. Memories of Rob keep coming to me and make me smile with amusement or cry from the loss.

Rob was brilliant yet humble. It took years for me to learn of even a small handful of his many accomplishments. He spoke of them in such a self-deprecating way that left you with the impression that he just stumbled into them and made the best of the situation that he found himself in. Luck, fortune, happenstance—these all play a part in all of our lives and certainly played a part in Rob's as well. However, from my experience with Rob, he was intentional in his work and life. He knew where he wanted to go, gathered what he needed to get there, and set his course. He did great things and lived an exciting, adventurous, and fulfilling life with purpose. He even prepared for his death and lived his final year on earth with purpose and intent. I learned so much from him that

In Memorium

will forever change the way I live my own life. I am grateful to him, love him dearly, and miss him every single day. Rob was always very plain spoken, honest, and even blunt. I always knew when he was about to share some unadorned observation when he would start a sentence with, “How can I say this?” It makes me laugh to remember this.

Rob’s passionate interest in collaboration is what brought him into my life. He wanted a genuine change in the NPS culture to one of true internal collaboration. Incorporating a broader array of perspectives increases the potential for innovative problem solving. As he framed it, including the full range of perspectives “...increases the relevance of individual divisions and programs to parks, which must manage for a wide range of interconnected resources” and “enable[s] a shared vision of our collective purpose, as well as facilitate[s] a much greater exchange of ideas and perspectives.” The NPS provides a lot of support and many resources to facilitate collaboration with external partners. There is less support to facilitate internal collaboration. And, we do not do a good job working collaboratively within the NPS across disciplines and programs. We work within the “silos” of our disciplines and programs as Rob would say.

He dedicated himself to shifting the NPS culture which included founding the NPS Collaboration Network. What a monumental task, to shift a culture! One of his greatest gifts to this agency and to land management in general is the example of how internal collaboration can benefit parks and the resources they steward. He gave us this example through SOPN, Southwest and Northern Rocky Mountain Invasive Plant Management Teams (IPMTs), Southern Plains Fire Group, and SOPN parks integrated planning and management efforts. This group developed annual plans together that included ecological and cultural desired conditions for management units within SOPN parks. Each member of the collaboration implemented the actions outlined in the plan, came together after the field season to assess the results of management actions, adjusted the plan as needed for the coming year, then started the cycle again. This is how we should be working. This is how we can be truly effective. Rob was a leader in many ways but in this, his work to shift the NPS culture to one of true collaboration, his vision and work are unparalleled.

There is no denying the great love Rob had for his family which he demonstrated in many ways including his desire to better know his nieces and what is important to them. He wanted his four nieces to have lives enriched through travel and the wide-array of experiences that come with that. He wanted them to see the world, be immersed in other cultures, and gain new perspectives through travel. To this end, he funded and arranged global travel adventures for them. He could no longer travel himself but he was able to share his nieces experiences from afar. It pleased him greatly to support their interests—cooking and exotic cuisines, art, nature, bonding time together— and give them this special gift from his heart.

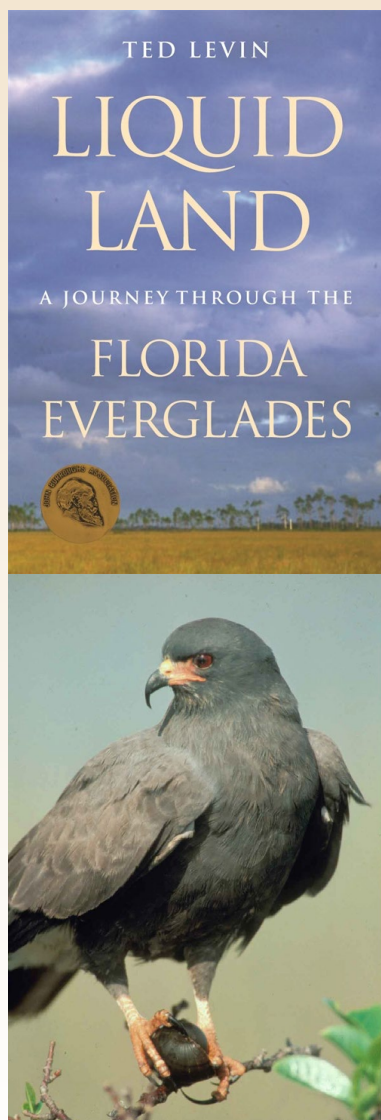
Terri Hogan, Invasive Plant Program Manager, Biological Resources Division



A figure Rob made for the Collaboration Network’s action plan.

In Memorium

Rob's work on Snail Kites in the Everglades was profiled in *Liquid Land: A Journey Through the Florida Everglades* by Ted Levin, which won the Burroughs Medal in 2004. This excerpt captures Rob's essence as a field scientist and his commitment to science communication.



Rob Bennetts's mahogany-tanned face emerges from a wrap of curly salt-and-pepper-colored hair and beard and presides over an ursine body. For a large man, he possesses uncommon stamina. His breath is perpetually labored, and his forehead is usually bathed in sweat. He often toils from before sunrise to well after dark—on the computer, in the field, and on the telephone. Engineers, water managers, biologists, administrators, newspaper reporters, and park service naturalists leave messages on his answering machine, seeking his advice, his opinion, and his time. He answers the most critical messages, those that concern aspects of Everglades restoration—spraying alien trees or the breaching of a levee, for instance—and their possible effect on nesting kites, from a cell phone while deep in the Everglades. His thick, steady hands band, draw blood samples from, and radio-tag kites—a procedure he calls “processing.” Rob Bennetts is witty, focused, and thoughtful, an eloquent advocate for the Everglades and snail kites.

He grew up in the Bay Area of California, far removed from Florida water politics. His grandmother, who was ambivalent about nature, gave him a field guide to birds. The gift proved fortuitous. A reluctant student who prefers the field, Rob has completed a doctoral program at the University of Florida. He radiates information and thrives on the tie between research and interpretation, particularly in the Everglades, where restoration depends on the sympathy of an educated public. When I told him how a park service naturalist had incorporated his fieldwork into her Shark Valley tram tour, he beamed. Another Everglades ranger, who had just returned from a stint in the field with Bennetts, declared, “If everyone in the park service had his work ethic, this would be one efficient operation.”



In Memorium

Excerpts from *Open Letter to the World and Snapshot of My Life* by Rob Bennetts

I have flown over the Serengeti Plains of Africa in a small plane over vast herds of wildebeests ... I have driven for hours along the shores where the Western Sahara meets the Atlantic Ocean ... where roads last only until the next wind storm ...

I spent hours in a small boat with a local guard in Scammons Lagoon of Baja where the Gray Whales give birth ... and had whales breaching the surface within a few feet of the boat ... I ventured into forests of monarch butterflies so thick that they form a foliage of butterflies ...

I have visited the strange and wondrous lands of Central Anatolia (Turkey) ...

In Ireland, I rented a cottage for a few months overlooking the sea ...

I lived and worked in the South of France where, I walked among the ancient buildings as I went about my daily routines ...

I've spent the night in a blind surrounded by 22,000 flamingos ...

I have lived & worked throughout the United States ...

I spent hours and hours watching hundreds of Bald Eagles in the spectacular setting of Glacier National Park ...

While in Florida, I have stood below 1400 circling Swallow-tailed kites, one of the most spectacular hawks in the world ...

I have sat under the northern skies in Montana for hours watching the Aurora Borealis ...

I have captured Grizzly Bears, American Crocodiles, Bald Eagles, Snail Kites, Spotted Owls ... and in my early days, even jumped out of airplanes in to forest fires as a member of the California Smoke Jumpers ... experiences that none could take for granted ...

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, at each of these locations or as part of each of these adventures, I shared good company and many a fine meal with friends and loved ones ...

My passing is merely a part of life and it was my time. I knew that it was coming soon and was completely at peace with it. ... So now is the time for you to live your life experiences. I hope that they are full of joy ... and most of all that you are wise enough (as I was not always) to take the time to enjoy what is really important ... sharing those experiences with friends and loved ones.



All photos on this page are from Rob's open letter.





Rob's brother Rich Bennetts and nieces Carley, Maddy, Kiki, and Ashlynn Bennetts would be grateful for cards of condolences and sharing of stories. Please send cards to them through Terri Hogan at:

*Terri Hogan
1201 Oakridge Dr, Suite 200
Fort Collins, CO 80525*



Snail Kites. Photos by Rob Bennetts.



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SOPN Parks

Alibates Flint Quarries National Monument
Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site
Capulin Volcano National Monument
Chickasaw National Recreation Area
Fort Larned National Historic Site
Fort Union National Monument
Lake Meredith National Recreation Area
Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park
Pecos National Historical Park
Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site
Washita Battlefield National Historic Site