

Obituary

JOHN AND JENNY BARNETT

Saturday 7th February marks a day of great loss to the study of mammalogy, because on that day two great Australian mammalogists died in the bushfire at Steels Creek while defending their home. John and Jenny loved the bush and had made their 'other' home at Steels Creek in the mid 1970s. They were to be found there most weekends, exploring the bush around them and entertaining their friends. John and Jenny were very different people, but they both combined excellent scientific skills with a good deal of modesty. They will be sadly missed.

John was born on 27 March 1949 in London, UK to Sylvia and Sydney Barnett (deceased). His stepfather, Joe Phillips, was also a considerable influence in John's life. John went to the University of Sheffield (BSc Hons, 1969) before coming to Australia to do a PhD with Tony Lee at the Department of Zoology at Monash University (1973). During his PhD, John met Jenny, and they married in 1972. At Monash, John furthered his interests in Australian mammals and stress physiology by doing a study of that most interesting of dasyurid marsupials; the agile antechinus. At the time, the agile antechinus was known to have a very vigorous and competitive breeding season, which was shorter and more intense, the more dense the population. The period during which the males were mating with the females was followed by a dramatic 'die off', when all males died. John's PhD and subsequent papers showed most clearly that in the period preceding the 'die off', males underwent dramatic weight loss and showed an increase in the concentration of corticosteroids, hypoglycaemia, and liver, blood and adrenal gland changes. John commented in his typical fashion that while he showed that the male antechinus exhibited a stress response just before dying, the study had not shown that the syndrome was a causal factor in death. In 1973–1974, he received a Leverhulme Commonwealth Visiting Fellowship, which he took at the Department of Zoology, University of Hull, UK to develop his work on stress physiology.

I first met John and Jenny in 1976, when John was one of three Post-Doctoral Fellows in Zoology (1974–1977) at La Trobe University. John, Rick How and Bill Humphreys were known as the 'Three Musketeers', and what a wonderful swashbuckling group they were. They went on to work together on various aspects of the ecology of small mammals, possums and gliders in eastern Australia, and they made a significant contribution to this field. Around this time (1978–1979), John became the Assistant Secretary of the Australian Mammal Society Council.

Unfortunately, the 1970s and early 1980s provided few job opportunities for zoologists and John, ever the pragmatist, turned his knowledge of measurement of stress parameters to improving farming conditions for domestic and companion animals, particularly pigs and poultry. This proved to be a fortunate decision for animal welfare. He worked as Research Officer, Research Scientist, Senior Research Scientist and Head of the Animal Welfare Department, Department of Natural

Resources and Environment, Agriculture Victoria, Victorian Institute of Animal Science, Werribee from 1977 to 2003. He was then made Leading Scientist, Department of Primary Industries (2004–2008) before moving in 2008 to become an honorary Associate Professor and Principal Research Fellow in Animal Welfare at the University of Melbourne, Melbourne School of Land and Environment, Department of Agriculture and Food Systems. His contributions in the animal welfare field at conferences and in numerous publications (greater than 300) earned him an international reputation and greatly improved animal husbandry techniques for farmed animals, especially his work on pigs and poultry. He showed quite clearly that the right housing conditions are paramount to the maintenance of animals in good stress-free conditions. He has earned International Travel Awards from Pig Research and Development Corporation (PRDC) and Egg Industry Research and Development Corporation (EIRDC) to several countries, has served on government and international animal welfare boards and has received numerous large grants to study these areas. He received a meritorious service award from the RSPCA (1999) and a science excellence award from the Department of Primary Industries (2005).

John and Jenny continued to make a contribution to wildlife biology by regular participation in the Mammal Survey Group of Victoria and in mammal surveys in other states. They taught many people the joys of trapping, spotlighting and learning to recognise our native fauna. They also contributed a publication to the mammal survey field and made numerous contributions to the distribution maps for native fauna.

We will all miss John, with his careful and analytical approach to his work and his thoughtful assessment of data, which he somehow managed to combine with a very laid-back approach to life. He was a great scientist and a very good friend. We will also miss the further opportunities to taste John's cooking, which was creative, exciting and totally uninhibited by the thought that any dish might be too difficult to achieve.

He leaves his mother Sylvia, stepfather Joe Phillips, brother Mark, sister Julia, and several nieces and nephews. They have our deepest sympathy.

Jenny Barnett (née Forse) was also born in England, on 25 August 1947 at Feltham to Laura and Fred Forse. She arrived in Australia in 1950 and did a BSc at Monash University (1969). She went on to do an MSc with George Ettershank at Monash on the biology of ants – on which she was always able to reveal many interesting facts. During this work she made lifelong friends with people she met at her study site, some of whom regularly gathered at the Barnetts' famous pre-Christmas lunch at Steels Creek.

After her marriage to John in 1972, Jenny worked at various research positions at the University of Hull, La Trobe University and the University of Melbourne. Over the years, she also became interested in the cultivation and biology of native orchids, especially the symbiotic relationship between native orchids and certain native trees, and she used this knowledge to

achieve successful cultivation of several species. Eventually she also took to painting them, so that they bloomed successfully on the door of the fridge or adorned her T-shirts. Her artistic efforts and very green thumb certainly enhanced their houses at Steels Creek and in Yarraville.

Jenny was always interested in all aspects of conservation of wildlife and the environment, and she used this interest to good effect when she started part-time and volunteer work during the 1980s at the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA), where she has worked ever since. She served on the VNPA Council and was Vice-President from 1988 to 1993. If there was an issue to be investigated, Jenny applied herself to it and brought her considerable analytical skills to the task. When we met up, as we did several times a year to catch up and have a meal, she would always have a brief outline of the problems in the latest environmental issue and what could be done about it. She was awarded a richly deserved Honorary Life Membership of the VNPA in 2006.

Jenny's working briefs, several of which I saw, were masterly assessments of the issues and how they might be dealt with. She combined her ability to analyse quite complex situations, as many environmental issues are, with a detached analytical approach to how the problem might be solved within the legal framework that governs our lives. I always thought she was very formidable in this role and I would hate to try to argue against her because she had such mastery of the evidence. I always saw her as the irresistible force moving an immovable object. Jenny often had a faint smile during discussions and you could see in her shrewd but benign eyes that she

was assessing what you said – sorting out the wheat from the chaff – as you chatted on. *The Age* photograph accompanying the short article on 11 February 2009 captured this look perfectly and it was a comfort to see it.

Jenny was not a person of extreme moods. She was passionate about the environment and the protection of wildlife but never seemed to get angry. I only saw her laugh outright once, when we were going to look for fossils in the roadside verges at Kinglake. I have been trying ever since her death to remember what was said at the time. Her ability to maintain a calm and reflective manner was what made her such an effective campaigner for environmental issues. Typical of Jenny was the production of the excellent small book 'Standing up for your local environment: an action guide' by Jenny Barnett and Rosemary Baker, illustrated by Veronica Holland. This book is simple, unpretentious, effective and incredibly useful.

Our sympathy goes out to Jenny's brothers, Richard and Jim Forse, and her sister-in-law Elizabeth Forse and her family.

Australia has really gained from the lives of John and Jenny Barnett. They have contributed much to Australian biological sciences, especially in the fields of physiological ecology, animal welfare, wildlife biology, conservation biology, and to addressing conservation and environmental issues. They have enriched Australian science and the lives of their friends. Rest in peace dear friends.

Lynne Selwood

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18th February 2009