

Memoriam for Charles Van Riper III

September 24, 1943 - February 7, 2025

www.charlesvanriper.com



Charles van Riper III, retired ST Research Scientist emeritus with the USGS Southwest Biological Science Center, passed away on February 7, 2025, after a short but intense battle with pancreatic cancer. He was 81 years old.

Born and raised in New York, Charles found himself in the same geographic region that former family members had occupied for the past several centuries since the first Van Riper sailed from the Netherlands (Holland) in 1643 for New Amsterdam (now New York City). Charles spent his formative years roaming the woods throughout the Hudson River Valley in New York. The many hours he spent observing wildlife as a young person instilled in him a love for nature and provided a road map that he would follow throughout his life. In 1968 he moved to the island of Hawaii. While teaching biology at the Hawaii Preparatory Academy in Kamuela, Hawaii, he began his first intensive study of birds, setting a focused trajectory for the remainder of his life. He taught his first ornithology class in 1969 to a select group of students, and many of that class have gone on to successful professional careers, but all still have a deep interest in nature and the study of birds. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Zoology at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, in 1966, followed by a Masters of Education in Science in 1967. In the early 1970s, he began studying the diverse group of endemic Hawaiian birds called honeycreepers.

While in Hawaii, Charles met Sandra Guest. He and Sandy worked together to solve the puzzle of how introduced diseases were decimating and leading to the extinction of many native Hawaiian birds. They fell in love over their shared fascination of science and passion for conservation, and were married in 1977. Charles received a PhD from the University of Hawaii in 1978 based on his honeycreeper-disease studies, work that continues to serve as the foundation of many current avian research and conservation efforts. Charles and Sandy left Hawaii for the mainland in 1979 after he was hired to establish the National Park Service Cooperative Park Studies Unit at the University of California, Davis. He excelled at this role of building dynamic natural resource science programs, which allowed him to create and lead similarly productive research programs.

He led the Colorado Plateau Research Station at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, AZ, initially under the National Park Service (NPS) (1989-1994), then with US Geological Survey (USGS) (1994 – 2003). He then headed the USGS Sonoran Desert Research Station in Tucson, AZ (2003-2013).

Charles was an outstanding leader in science who loved mentoring and collaboration. In his role leading NPS and USGS research offices at universities, Charles held professorships and served as a major professor and mentor to dozens of graduate students on diverse topics including wildlife diseases, island biogeography, birds, mammals, riparian and desert ecology, the urban-wildland interface, and wildlife conservation. He was a strong advocate for research that addressed important on-the-ground management issues, and he worked equally hard to make sure that these research results were effectively communicated to the resource management community. These efforts are exemplified in his role in initiating and building the ongoing Biennial Conference on Research on the Colorado Plateau, now in its 35th year.

Throughout his career, even while taking on management and leadership roles, Charles was an active and prolific scientist, publishing roughly 200 papers in peer-reviewed journals, books, and other outlets and over 300 total publications. He was a member, Board Member, Chair, and Journal Editor for national and international scientific societies for birds, wildlife, and wildlife disease. He was a long-time member (Elected 1982, Fellow 2000) of the American Ornithologists' Union and the Cooper Ornithological Society (Life and Honorary), and Life Member of the Wilson Ornithology Society, George Wright Society, Hawaii Audubon Society, Raptor Research Foundation Society, and Wildlife Disease Association (Life Member and Emeritus Status). In 2000, he became an Elected Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). In recognition of his outstanding science achievements and impact, Charles was promoted in 2008 to a USGS ST Research Scientist position. He held this role through his retirement in 2014 conducting field research and writing through 2024. Examples of his contributions to science and management with federal agencies and external partners include being lead author on the first multi-agency effort to document population size, distribution and habitat associations of the endangered Palila in 1975-1976. The same methods and transects used during those first surveys are still being used fifty years later. He was a member of the Peregrine Falcon Recovery Team (1982-88), Border Strategy Team, Department of Interior (2006-11), receiving the NPS Director's Natural Resources Award (1991), serving as the first Ombudsman for the National Biological Survey (1994), 1999 USGS Science Strategy team, and receiving the USGS Service Medal (2013), the George B. Fell Lifetime Achievement Award (2006) and the Natural Resources Award from the George Wright Society on Parks, Protected Areas and Cultural Sites (2007).

When he retired in 2014, he was a Senior (ST) Research biologist with the Biology section of the U.S. Geological Survey. He was promoted to Emeritus Professor/ST Research Ecologist at Department of Interior USGS and University of Arizona and

continued active breeding biology research on the Western Cordilleran Flycatchers in Colorado and on Mt Lemmon in Arizona. His Arizona property was developed into a National Wildlife Federation Certified Habitat. Charles achieved Master Gardener many years ago and always worked tirelessly in his garden, producing wonderful fruits and vegetables from his compost. He and Sandy also donated by conservation easement 40 acres to Lone Pine State Park in Montana and established endowments to Northern Arizona University, Colorado State University and University of Hawaii assisting students to travel to professional meetings.

Charles' life outside of work was as diverse and impactful as his science. He was very proud of being an Eagle Scout as a youth. After graduating from high school, he was tutored at Julliard School of Music and enjoyed playing a variety of musical instruments. Charles was also an avid hunter, often trudging miles through snow during elk season in northern Arizona. He and Sandy loved rural life and ranching on their properties; he truly appreciated a good pair of cowboy boots, and knew how to shear a sheep, operate a backhoe, and graft a fruit tree. This passion extended to his community as well: he was active in 4H, leading local youth groups, judging stock shows, and teaching kids how to give presentations and appreciate nature. As a well-known face around the local county fairs, he helped run the stock animal barns, served on annual fair boards, and won many ribbons for products from his garden. Later in life, he founded Homestead Firearms and Parts with daughter Jacque and pursued his love of antique Winchesters and guns of the old west. His final research project was a study on Western Cordilleran Flycatchers in Colorado and on Mt. Lemmon, Arizona, where he became involved with the promotion of citizen science by utilizing many of the Summerhaven residents that hosted and helped collect data from the nest box platforms that they placed on their cabins. The 15 years of Flycatcher research resulted in many publications.

Charles brought great energy and enthusiasm to everything he did in life – conducting and leading science, mentoring students, interacting with colleagues, engaging with his community, and most important of all, loving and supporting his family and friends. He will be hugely missed, but he leaves behind a rich and deep legacy. Charles is survived by his wife Sandy, son Charles (Kale), daughters Jacqueline, Kimberly, Carena, and four grandchildren Charlie, Mycah, Camina, Clara, and two brothers, Lt. Commander Drew F. Van Riper of Manassas, Virginia and Dr. Gary Van Riper of Morrison, Colorado.