

RANDALL MORGAN:  
A STORY OF LOVING CALIFORNIA (1947-2017)

by

Michelle Shanon Pastor

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### **Randall Morgan: A Story of Loving California (1947-2017)**

Randall Morgan was born in 1947 in Santa Cruz County, California. He grew up on a small ranch covered with cherry and plum orchards in the outskirts of Soquel among his three brothers Wayne, Jeff, and Jon. His father was a hard worker who was quiet with a gentle soul, an underrated sense of humor, and a twinkle in his eye. Randy's mother was more the driver in the family, fiercely devoted and wise. From his early years, Morgan was interested in the natural world. Some of his very first words came after seeing a few birds fly by his kitchen window and him turning to ask his father "What kind of bird was that?" (Morgan 2017).

At the age of only five, he fell sick with rheumatic fever and was bedridden for an entire year, leaving him to gaze out of his bedroom window at the beautiful, flighty creatures that truly became his first loves. As soon as he recovered and was old enough, Randy was eager to spend time duck hunting with his father, which allowed him to get even closer to the creatures that captivated his attention. "Every time a dead bird would come my way, I would think - it's too beautiful and interesting to let it rot!" (Morgan 2017). He followed up on this interest by processing and cleaning hunted ducks so that he could spend time studying their plumage and trachea, hanging them on his wall as a collection, every part of these organisms leaving him enthralled.

Randy began his formal education inspired by a collection of mounted birds displayed at Soquel Elementary, where he first attended public school and yet another seed of curiosity was planted. By age 12, because of his increased interest in birds, his father helped him to learn the process of taxidermy. By virtue of being a small farmer, his father had some knowledge about such things and got Randy the equipment, sitting with his eagerly curious son and reading step-by-step instructions. Randy's father eventually built him a large desk so that he would have a space for his taxidermy work. Around the same time, finances had become very strained, and Randy's parents had to sell the family farm to developers who were building houses around the up-and-coming University of California, Santa Cruz. Seeing bulldozers come through the vast spaces where he adventured with his brothers was hard for Randy to handle. It was a pivotal moment in his sense of injustice in how humans tend to treat the natural world.

Soon after, Randy came into contact with Claude Hooper, the president of the Santa Cruz Bird Club at the time. Randy was only in high school when he emerged onto the local birding scene by joining the Bird Club, and his involvement only increased over time. As soon as he began attending college at UC Santa Cruz, he was hired by the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History to make lifelike mounts of birds and mammals. This taxidermy work helped him pay his way through college in a time "before it became too expensive to pay your way through college" (Morgan 2017). Randy also had a keen interest in obscure languages and the native peoples of California, graduating from UCSC with a Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics. His interest in etymology of language and native peoples aligned well with his personality and highlighted his intense curiosity and fierce attention to detail.

Randall Morgan was a man that cannot be easily described, and the impact that he has had on people is as undeniable as the value of the work he did throughout his lifetime to support conservation and ecological research within Santa Cruz County. It seemed that he was "too vast to comprehend all the parts of him, and all that he carried inside himself" notes a friend and colleague, Robert Stephens, who had a particular story to share as an example. One day, the two of them were conducting a biological survey at a property that was about to be developed behind

San Juan Bautista. Stephens could see that there was something going on within Randy, as he was growing increasingly more agitated. When Stephens inquired about his mood, Randy shared that he was feeling disturbed because in a past life, he was an Ohlone woman who resided in that very region and had contracted a deadly case of small pox. She knew she was going to die so she climbed to the top of the very mountain they were currently surveying to eventually be eaten by turkey vultures and condors. Many parts of Randy's character made those who were close to him feel that there was something to him that could *never* be pinned down to simple genius.

## FOCI IN NATURAL HISTORY

After joining the Santa Cruz Bird Club in 1960, Randall Morgan began to walk in the ways of a birder and notice projects that could be done. At UCSC, he spent a year “compiling and consolidating the county ornithological record, to create the most thorough archive ever gathered up to that time” (Sudjjian, 2006), which later came to be known as the Bird File. This collection was pivotal for the local birding community, because it has now grown to be the principal repository for bird records in Santa Cruz County. His focus, however, began to change with his introduction to a new mentor named William “Wild Bill” Anderson.

Morgan developed a new interest in botany after meeting Wild Bill through his grandfather, a retiree from the Department of Fish and Wildlife and member of the Bird Club. He had invited Randy to tag along on a birding trip and eventually many more trips throughout the early 1970s where Wild Bill “rubbed his nose in plants until it caught” (Morgan, R. Interview). The Endangered Species Act was enacted in 1973 and developers needed to hire biologists to create biological survey reports which soon gave Wild Bill and Randy work to do. One day was sent to the Quail Hollow Sand Quarry to do a biological survey and was struck by the uniqueness of the sandhills ecosystem. The annual flowers and rare insects made him see it as a “different world” (Morgan, 2012), and he knew there was no way he could see this land be destroyed. Through his conservation work with the sandhills, he realized that the ultimate salvation of these habitats would be finding and documenting endangered or rare insects in these places. This was because the Endangered Species Act mostly focused on animals. This quickly led to yet another intense interest within the world of natural history.

Entomology and collecting insects became a new goal for Randy after a pivotal moment in the sandhills. After

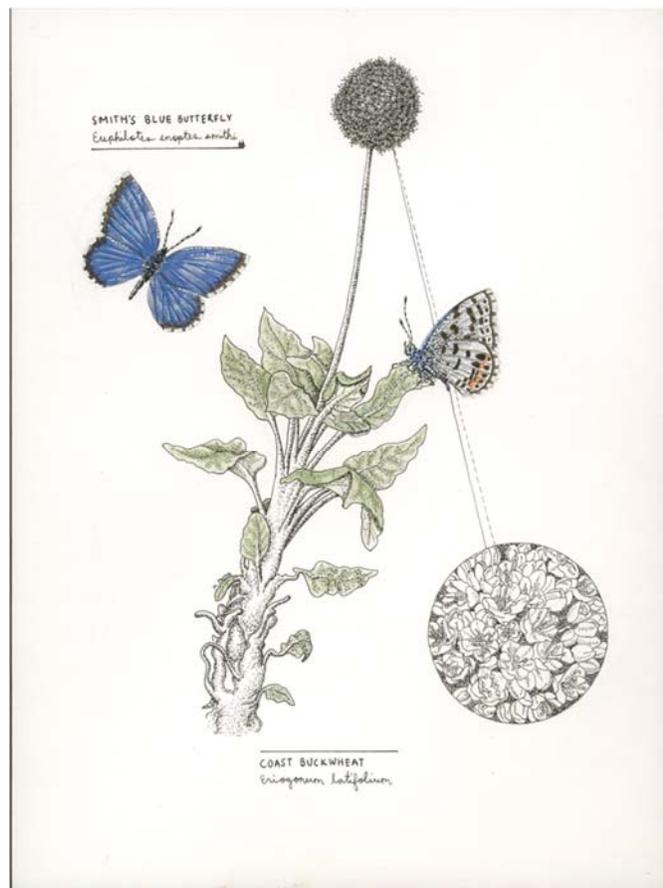


Figure 1. Smith's Blue Butterfly on host plant Coast Buckwheat

visiting a specific area of the sandhills that was being battled over and seeing that the developers had stripped the surface of the hill as a preemptive act to discourage conservationists, he was looking for any sign of hope. He realized that if this site was simply left alone for a few years, it would have the ability to recover vegetation and fauna. This is when he caught a glance of the rare and endangered Smith's Blue butterfly lit on a Coastal Buckwheat plant, only previously known to be seen in one small coastal site of Monterey County. They used the discovery of this butterfly to protect the site, and soon his insect collecting became a fascination.

He decided in 1989 to collect insects systematically to document all of the interesting ecosystems around the county that either were already or would eventually be put into danger. He decided it would be a 10-year project. He would collect from 3-6 sites every year and repeat a few of them for consistency. With the extensive time he spent outdoors, Randy made yet another important discovery. In 1987, Randall Morgan found a beetle that had not been described before in the Marshall Fields of the upper UCSC campus. At the time, Randy's insect collection was housed at the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History where a committed volunteer, Patricia Smith did much of the labeling of the specimens. For all of her hard work, Randall Morgan wished to describe the species and name it after her. To his dismay, after trying to name it *Cicindela smithii* or *Cicindela patriceae*, he realized there simply were so many beetles already described in the world that these names were already in use. In the end, he decided to name this charismatic insect *Cicindela ohlone*, the Ohlone Tiger Beetle.

## INVOLVEMENT IN LOCAL CONSERVATION

Through his extensive visits to all the various ecosystems of Santa Cruz County for his insect collection work, he discovered more and more rare and diverse habitats that were in danger of being developed and in need of protection. The destruction of much of the sandhills inspired Randy to be involved with advocacy. He knew that he was going to need others on his team to write letters, create slideshows, and attend city council meetings. After joining the Santa Cruz Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, he found others who wanted to help. He also advocated to protect the Scott's Valley Grasslands. In his gentle shyness but determined passion, Randy and a

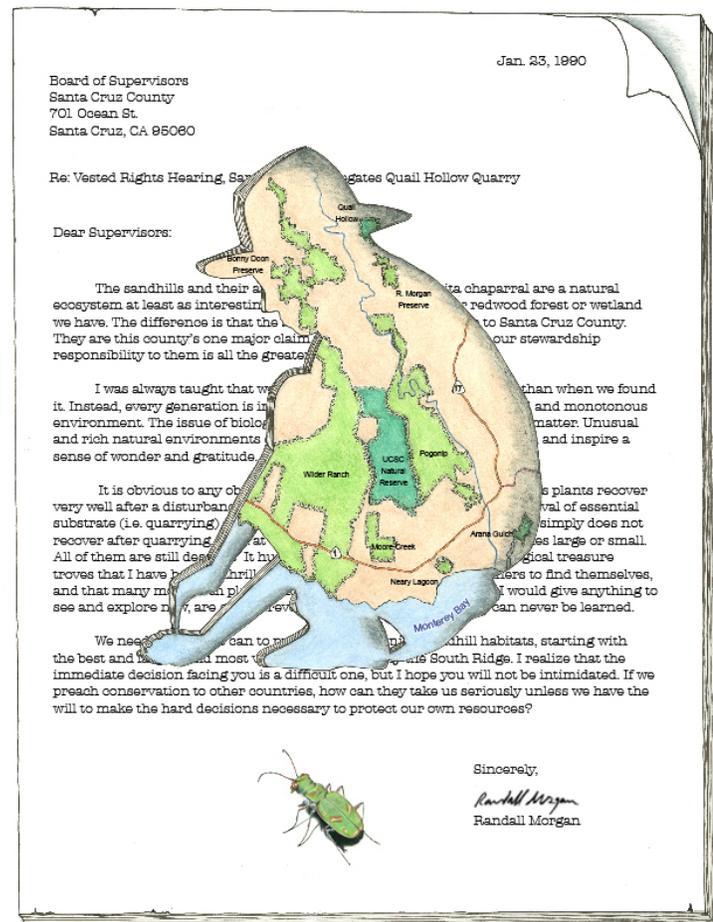


Figure 2. Stack of letters written by Randy during his conservation efforts. A silhouette of Randy is cut into the pages revealing a map of areas of Santa Cruz County he took part in protecting. (Featuring Ohlone Tiger Beetle.)

colleague named Julia Davenport attended a Scott's Valley City Council meeting. Their intention was to present a slideshow about the state of endangerment of the grasslands. The council refused to give Randy much of their time and insisted that he hold the projector in his hands and talk quickly. Randy gave the full presentation with breathtaking photos. His hands shook with nerves yet, "he wasn't embarrassed. He wasn't thinking of himself," noted Julia Davenport. His passion to conserve the places he loved took him much further than he ever could have gone with his personal limitations.

As time went on, Morgan was also involved in protecting Quail Hollow Ranch, the Bonny Doon Ecological Reserve, the UCSC Campus Natural Reserve, Moore Creek, Wilder Ranch, Arana Gulch, and Pogonip. Often he surveyed the lands and dictated letters to people like Julia Davenport to send to the City Council. Finally, in 2008, a small part of the sandhills was officially protected when the Land Trust established it as the Randall Morgan Sandhills Preserve.



*Figure 3. The Scott's Valley Grasslands, one of Randy's beloved ecosystems.*

## MENTORING

Despite the fact that Randall Morgan never truly sought to mentor others, his encouragement and inclusionary attitude meant that he inspired many people who do pivotal ecological work in the Santa Cruz area today, such as Grey Hayes, Dylan Neubauer, Christopher Lay, Jim Velzy, Bill Reid, Ken Moore, Jodie McGraw, and Brett Hall. Despite his lack of intention to mentor, it was difficult for someone to be around him *without* coming to learn more about a subject than anyone previously thought they could. Randy helped Grey Hayes to do research and write his dissertation on cattle grazing and coastal prairie wildflowers. Dylan Neubauer spent a great amount of time with Randy throughout the years and together they created the Annotated Checklist of Vascular Plants of Santa Cruz County, a book that highlighted the plants of the county that were rare or special. She later went on to create an even more elaborate second version and is now a renowned botanist in California. Chris Lay, the current director of the Ken Norris Center for Natural History at UCSC, recounts that Randall Morgan was patient in helping him truly understand the depth and value of the plant and insect collections he later entrusted to the Norris Center. Chris Lay knew that Randy's collections would become an important part of the Norris Center, helping it to become a respected museum and a place that would be able to support both broad and local natural history learning. Jim Velzy, the current Director of the UCSC greenhouses, worked closely with Randy on his life-long study of clovers (genus *Trifolium*). Bill Reid now runs the site stewardship for the UCSC grounds. Ken Moore managed the Wildlands Restoration Team, a volunteer based non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the rich biological diversity of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Jodi McGraw, who did her dissertation studying the sandhills and created a Sandhills Conservation and Management Plan for the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, learned from Randy. Randy taught Brett Hall, long-time UCSC Arboretum Staff member and current president of the California Native Plant Society.

All those who knew Randall Morgan universally feel undeniably included in his journey. His attitude was that of inclusion, even with all his knowledge and incredible abilities to perceive and remember the most miniscule details of a landscape or the syntax of an ancient language. His gentleness and humility made others feel like they knew a lot too. A friend and colleague of Randy's, Julia Davenport, spoke on this topic. Many were drawn to Randy because of his manner of openness and "if someone was even slightly interested in plants, he was interested in them" (Davenport, J. interview). Often just accompanying him on many outings in the field could turn someone into something of an expert themselves. "His intention never was to impress anyone and he was purely focused on benefitting the biological community and the world around him. He was refreshingly selfless," noted Jim Velzy, director of the UCSC greenhouses.

## PLANT AND INSECT COLLECTIONS

The Morgan Insect Collection is the most valuable collection housed at the Norris Center for Natural History. At first, Morgan was hesitant to bring his collections to UC Santa Cruz. He was frustrated that many UCSC faculty did not focus their studies on local natural history and managing the land where they were located. Eventually, under the careful management of volunteers at the UCSC Natural History Collections (later the Kenneth Norris Center for Natural History), Randall Morgan transferred his insect and plant collections from the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History in 2003. "Without Randy's collections, the Norris Center would not have the same depth of resource," explains Chris Lay. Randy's collections have helped the

Norris Center to attract researchers, students, and the greater community to curate and use the collections.

Randy guided the effort in developing the herbarium and curating the insect collection in the Norris Center. His plant collection is what inspired volunteers to create the herbarium on campus. These volunteers have put in thousands of hours over the last 15 years to curate Randy's collection by mounting, accessioning, digitizing, and geo-referencing each of the specimens within the Norris Center herbarium in order to see Randy's plants permanently protected. Al Keuter is one such volunteer who has taken it upon himself to manage the herbarium. While he was alive, Randy did much of the identification and annotation work based on changes to general understanding of these plants over time, especially the clovers. He often requested clover specimens from other herbariums to compare and became an expert on this genus.

Randy did much of the initial pinning and some quick labeling of identifications of most of his 70,000 insect specimens as he was collecting them. In order to identify as many insects as possible, he took a large number of the specimens up to the California Academy of Sciences and sent them to taxonomists all over the world. In 2016, Professor Karen Holl and Chris Lay successfully wrote a grant to the Institute of Museum and Library Services to curate and digitize the 30,000+ pollinators in his collection so they could be fully utilized for research and teaching. Entering specimen information into the database, organizing the specimens taxonomically, and final labeling has widely been the work of dedicated students.

The Randall Morgan collections are uniquely valuable because they link both plants and insects over the course of 11 years, which few other collections do in such an exhaustive manner. Each individual insect specimen has records that are associated specifically with a plant. This allows scientists to analyze the relationship between pollinators and their plants and can give an idea of how, when, and where the local environment is changing over time. Because we have such a thorough picture of the plant-pollinator community in the 1990s (during Randy's collecting years), they can be used to compare with more recent surveys in the same places. This work has already begun with the work of graduate students Angelita Ashbacher and Juliette Oshiro. Angie has been working on conducting comparative surveys throughout the different ecosystems of Santa Cruz County and creating "pollinator networks." These networks serve as a visual representation of how various species of plants and pollinators are connected in a complex web and how this web has changed over time. The creation of these pollinator networks has been possible because of Angie's hard work and access to Randy's collections. Juliette has used Randy's plant collection to study local plant phenology and understand how these populations will adapt to climatic changes in the coming years. The research value of Randy's collections has only begun to be fully utilized.

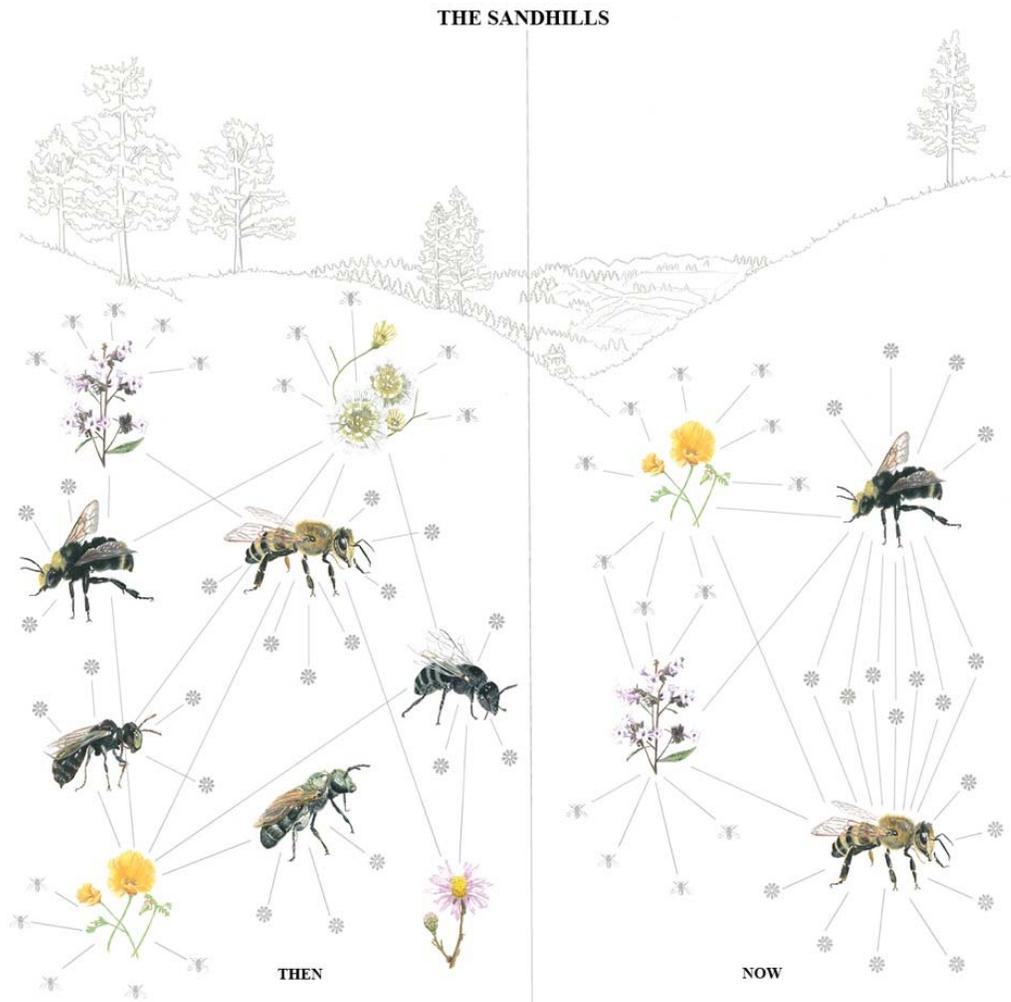


Figure 4. Pollinator networks in the Sandhills (past and present).

### LONG-LASTING IMPACTS

In 2017, Randy knew he was nearing his death, and several of his colleagues came together with him to create what is now called the Randall Morgan Initiative. This initiative aims to “honor, preserve, and build upon the legacy of Morgan’s own projects and collections” (R.M. Initiative). It is funded by contributions to the Norris Center and aims to do three things. The first is to promote long-term stewardship in order to maintain the integrity of Randy’s many collections housed at the Norris Center. The second is to support undergraduate research and courses that build upon his collections work and field studies. The third component of the initiative is to offer mentoring opportunities that incorporate monitoring and stewardship of environmentally sensitive sites in Santa Cruz County. This translates into graduate student fellows mentoring undergraduates in conducting long-term observational studies at local and sensitive sites. In addition, funds support opportunities for students and mentors to travel to conferences, symposia, or workshops to present their findings. In creating this initiative and

bringing his collections to UCSC, Randy's intentions were to make sure that they would be accessible to students and anyone with an interest in the natural world.

As Randy grew more and more involved in various projects related to the natural world throughout his journey, his lifestyle grew increasingly "minimalist". The natural world was something he had built his life around, which he expressed in the following quote.

*"Our definition of God is, like ourselves: small, petty, mean, limited, irrational. Change the definition of God and everything comes right, all falls together, conflict disappears, everyone can agree: GOD IS EVERYTHING. GOD IS NATURE. If you want to see (a tiny part?) of God's face, look at the sky, look at a bug, look at the laws of physics and chemistry, look in the mirror...*

*Any scientist can claim to be working in some tiny branch of theology- studying, say, earthworms or clovers or extinct languages. All these things are part of the real God's body....*

*God (NATURE) is my first love, my refuge, my life." R. Morgan 29 May 2006*

Because of this intense dedication and love for the natural world, Randy was not bothered with things such as earning money to heat his home when he could be outside on a cold and wet day, searching for rain beetles. Those who surrounded him noted that he was absolutely in love with what he involved himself in and he was constantly on a mission to notice things that no one else seemed to have the eyes or ears to notice. His dedication to observation and interaction with the natural world unfortunately often led his attention away from his own health, landing him in the hospital a few times. A hospital admittance in 2010 was especially serious. With all of his projects still in the works, many were visiting Randy declaring that there was still too much he had to do before he could leave them.

Towards the end of his life, even without formal education in ecology, Randall Morgan became one of the key experts the county and often the state would turn to for knowledge in entomology, botany, and ornithology. He was a large contributor and advisor for the master plant list within the "The Natural History of the UC Santa Cruz Campus" book. In addition, he continued to be hired to write environmental impact reports all over the county and for the UCSC campus in his later years. Some have felt that Randy's passing has not only meant losing a valuable friend or family member but also losing one of the greatest resources they had to understanding the natural world. The Norris Center aims to support the rise of new learners and observers like Randy and incite the kind of curiosity and love that he had for the natural world.

Randall Morgan left a legacy in his work as well as in the lasting impacts he made on the people around him. Not only can we learn from his extensive effort in conservation and his collections, but also from the manner in which he loved the natural world and worked to protect the ecosystems of Santa Cruz. In several ways, his life's work created a baseline for many more people in the future to build upon. This can be seen in the sense of all the valuable information to be drawn out of the collections but also in the inspiration to go outside and observe the way Randy observed. Randy's life speaks to us to notice the things that no one else takes the time to notice in a world that is constantly changing. His life is also a good example of how much of a blessing we can be to others when we interact in ways of humility and gentleness. And most of all, it prompts us to "let nature be a restorative place" (Stephens, 2018), so that our relationship to it can give us the passion and drive to protect it from destruction.



*Figure 5. Randy working in the UCSC greenhouses (left) and sharing his love of learning with others (right).*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of Randy's friends, colleagues, and family who put time into helping make this biography as accurate and as true to who Randy was as possible. Special thanks to Wayne Morgan, Christopher Lay, Karen Holl, Robert Stephens, Dylan Neubauer, Linda Locatelli, Julia Davenport, and Laurie Kiguchi for their guidance and personal stories/anecdotes. I would like to dedicate this biography to all lovers and students of the natural world and the Ken Norris Center for Natural History.

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