

SOONER SPOTLIGHT • GARY SCHNELL

Gary Schnell wears three hats at the University of Oklahoma—curator of birds at Stovall Museum of Science and History, director of the Oklahoma Biological Survey and professor of zoology — and he wears each one quite well.

Trained as an ornithologist, Schnell has held the Stovall position since shortly after joining the OU faculty in 1970, soon after the retirement of the late George Sutton, internationally known ornithologist/bird artist and curator of birds at Stovall. Schnell also served one-year terms as interim director of Stovall in 1979 and 1982.

Since 1978, Schnell has directed the Survey, where he is charged with coordinating studies of the plants and animals of Oklahoma. He also oversees the biological management of the Oliver Wildlife Preserve. The workload, which most often involves his evenings and weekends, just goes with the territory, Schnell says, adding that the responsibilities often overlap, facilitating the meeting of goals in all three positions.

Schnell teaches three courses: an undergraduate course in evolution; a course in numerical systematics, the application of statistical techniques to the study of the interrelationships of organisms; and a graduate course on birds of the world, a survey course on the families and subfamilies into which 9,000 species are classified.

"The part I enjoy most is working with graduate students, and I think it's the part I'm best at — working on a one-to-one basis. It is exciting to see and be a part of the development of graduate students as they learn about research."

Schnell divides research time between birds and mammals and specializes in the applications of statistical and computer techniques to biological problems. He recently published two papers on geographic variations of spinner and spotted dolphins of the eastern tropical Pacific, assisted zoology chairman James Thompson in a study of fruitfly populations, and worked with associate professor Bedford Vestal on a study of enclosed mice and multiple character measurements. With Thompson and Vestal, Schnell's statistical techniques were employed to analyze data.



Gary Schnell, assisted by graduate student Janet Kay Braun, left, addresses one of his three assignments at the University, curator of birds at Stovall Museum.

A capable programmer, Schnell has overseen the establishment of a substantial, computerized database of the plants and animals of Oklahoma which, he says, is a time saver he would not want to be without. Dan Hough, the Survey's resident computer software research specialist, assisted Schnell with the project.

"We provide information to a number of researchers," Schnell says. "We're always being asked questions like, 'How common are scissor-tailed flycatchers in five counties in southwestern Oklahoma during the breeding season?'"

A pet project remains "on the drawing board," but hopefully not for long. Under way are plans for a natural science research complex to be constructed on the south campus.

In addition to providing facilities not currently available and replacing World War II-vintage buildings, the new complex will consolidate a behavior lab on the north campus where students work with caged animals; a fisheries laboratory in Noble; and the Oklahoma Fisheries Research Laboratory on north campus, a cooperative laboratory of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and the

Oklahoma Biological Survey. Schnell and other OU administrators and faculty members are meeting regularly to hammer out the "details."

"My statement last spring was, 'Well, it's all but built, and by the way, we also need some money,'" Schnell hastens to add. "I think it would broaden the horizons of our graduate students and our faculty in terms of the type of research that we can do."

The obvious temptation would be to draw a comparison between Schnell and Sutton, but Schnell is undaunted by the suggestion of his "filling Sutton's shoes."

"I was very much aware of his work from the time I was a kid growing up. He was a tremendous personality; he had great driving force. He focused his activities, and he was tremendously productive. So one of the first things that became clear to me was that I couldn't fill his shoes in any sort of exact fashion. What I tried to do right from the start was build my own program and coordinate with him as much as we possibly could."

Schnell seems to have the right idea. Perhaps you can best fill someone's shoes by not trying to. Perhaps what really counts is how you wear your hat.

— MARGARET FRENCH