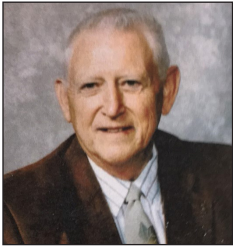


In Memory

James E. “Jim” Miller



JAMES E. “JIM” MILLER, age 80, passed away on January 24, 2022. I received the sad news from Jim’s wife, Doris, that evening. Such news is always shocking and was especially so in this

case. For those of us in the wildlife profession, it seemed like Jim had always been there for us and always would be.

The sad news traveled quickly through the internet, prompting many expressions of sorrow but also many stories of friendship and interactions with Jim. The same words and phrases appeared in message after message. Jim’s many friends and colleagues remember him as tireless, an exceptional mentor, dependable, honest, a superb steward of the land, and a wonderful friend and colleague. Jim’s enthusiasm was contagious, his knowledge of wildlife management and animal ecology vast, and he always had the best interest of the wildlife resource in mind. Jim’s field skills, especially as a turkey hunter, deserve special attention.

On the personal side, Jim is survived by Doris, his wife of 59 years. Jim had a wonderful relationship with Doris and spoke of her often—about her cooking, taking care of him when the needs arose, their profound faith, their travels together, and other life experiences. Jim and Doris have two sons, James and John, and one grandson, Brooks. He spoke frequently about outdoor activities with his boys.

Professionally, Jim started a long career in federal service as an extension wildlife specialist in Arkansas, working mainly with beaver management and other aspects of wildlife damage control. In 1978, he embraced the role of national program leader for Fish and Wildlife Extension at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C. For 23 years, the country boy from Alabama thrived in Washington, and extension programs were in his very dedicated and capable hands. He retired from the

program leader position in 2001 and found a new professional home at Mississippi State University (MSU) as a wildlife extension and outreach professor. But he remained very active on the national scene. Jim retired from the MSU position in 2005 but remained on campus as a mentor to students, ambassador for MSU programs, and outspoken champion of science and common sense regarding contentious wildlife management issues. He left campus in 2015 but continued to attend professional meetings and speak out on issues from his home in Starkville, Mississippi.

Those are the basics of Jim Miller’s career and life, but what will be most remembered and cherished are his contributions and life as a friend, colleague, and fellow hunter.

Arguably, perhaps, his foremost outdoor passion was turkey hunting. Jim’s skill in the turkey woods was and is legendary. Those of us lucky enough to have hunted turkeys with him marveled at his knowledge of the birds and their habitat, his ability to communicate with them, and his stamina and persistence in the pursuit of gobblers. Many things drove Jim Miller, but spring turkey hunting was something he lived for. In the woods, no gobbler was safe if it was within his hearing distance!

Jim could call turkeys with just about anything, and he always carried some type of turkey call with him. He was always willing to teach anyone the finer points of calling turkeys. At Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow workshops, his open discussion on turkey hunting and calling was always very popular. It was so popular that we routinely removed all the plastic coffee stir sticks from the dining room out of fear that Jim would teach another cohort of students how to use them as turkey calls!

Jim’s long awaited and much anticipated book on turkey hunting was scheduled to release in March 2022. He was very excited about having that labor of love in his hands. Sadly, that will not happen for Jim, but hopefully, all of us can obtain a copy.

Jim was nearly as skilled a storyteller as he was a turkey hunter. To be present for one of Jim's story-telling sessions was an opportunity not to be missed. The stories were usually based on his years growing up in rural Alabama with a real-life cast of characters guaranteed to have enthralled listeners laughing to the point of tears and sore ribs. Who can forget Peaches and Dauber or Noonyer, swimming in the creek with the rope swing, corn cob battles, bloody knuckles from the hully gully marble games, or the mule and mole incident? The final wave of laughter often broke out at the end of a story with "and then the fight broke out!" No matter how many times you had heard a story, you wanted to hear it again. Jim's early life would have made a perfect television series to rival Andy Griffith and life in Mayberry!

It must be noted that Jim was an ardent fair-chase hunter of many game species besides wild turkey. He was a superb shooter with shotgun and rifle alike. Jim was also a collector and dealer of fine firearms.

Perhaps it was all of his time in the field while hunting, or the wild rides of his youth, that helped make Jim a strong, tough man. With a short paddle in one hand, he could propel a johnboat by sculling as swiftly and smoothly as could the finest Minn-Kota! At the same time, with his other hand, Jim could cast as deftly as anyone else in the boat.

He was also very adept and fearless when driving his cherished Ford pickup. On a duck hunting trip from northern Illinois to Stuttgart, Arkansas, Jim ran into an ice storm as 3 of us crossed the Mississippi in Jim's truck. The windshield iced over, the roads had the traction of a hockey rink, but Jim forged ahead—ducks were waiting. I managed to glance at Dick McCabe in the back seat, and he was as white as a ghost with eyes the size of baseballs, and I don't think he was breathing. For my part, my fingers were embedded in the armrests. We made it, we survived—and we shot some ducks.

Throughout Jim's long career and semi-retirement, he was a champion of the Cooperative Extension Service system and mission, from top to bottom. His early days in Arkansas fostered a keen respect for the role of county agents as the foundation of extension programs. At the top of the pyramid, as national program leader, he created a strong sense of team spirit, shared

mission, and collaboration among the state fish and wildlife specialists across the country. In that role, Jim provided many things for his team: regular and meaningful communications, links to partnerships, insight, a voice in Congress and federal agencies, sources of program funding, and the opportunity to get to know each other and share successes and failures. The national team of wildlife specialists did not have these advantages before Jim Miller and has not had them since, at least not to the same degree.

Jim's relationship with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' Office of Extension and Publications (Duncan McDonald and Dan Stiles) was fantastic. Because of it, specialists were able to secure support for all sorts of projects and publications.

Jim was also part of the team that created the national Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow program, which seeks to promote an awareness and appreciation of hunting in America and the role and importance of hunting in wildlife conservation and management. The program has been very successful in reaching out to non-hunting wildlife professionals and university students. Jim was a skilled workshop instructor for 15 years.

Jim was an enthusiastic supporter and promoter of specific extension program areas like "4H." The 4H Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Project, 4H Shooting Sports, and National 4H Awards given at the "North American" Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference all took root and flourished across the country under Jim's leadership.

The Triennial Fish and Wildlife Specialists workshops were a highlight of Jim's tenure as national program leader. Jim secured national funding and, with local specialist help, established national gatherings of all program specialists every 3 years. For a few days, specialists could get together and share new ideas, develop collaborations, have some fun with colleagues, and leave for home feeling energized and as if they had just left a family reunion. The workshops were not to be missed. After Jim's retirement as national program leader, the workshops slowly withered and have been absorbed into other large conferences.

Another opportunity Jim provided at large conferences was the Fellowship of Christian Conservationists. As a measure of his powerful religious faith, Jim promoted, organized, and

attended fellowship meetings.

Specialists who attended the North American conference and later The Wildlife Society (TWS) annual conferences were always offered the opportunity to meet to hear Jim update the team on activity at the federal level, opportunities, funding, and other news. This was all possible because Jim was so well networked and well liked! He was a fixture at conferences for years—The North American, TWS, the Vertebrate Pest Conference, regional conferences like the southeastern, and many others. Jim was there networking and always sitting in the front row of huge meeting rooms—always in a western style or camo sport coat, with a string tie, plus cowboy boots and with his briefcase.

Jim was a professional in every sense of the word. He was tireless in his support and volunteerism for his professional society, TWS, at all of its levels. He served as president of 2 state chapters, southeast section representative to TWS Council, and president of the society in 1998–1999. Jim was quick to speak out on the direction of the society, pro or con, but he was always constructive and honest.

In fact, whenever Jim found a cause he had strong feelings about, he was “all in.” He spoke, wrote, testified, and shared about many contentious challenges in wildlife conservation, including high-fence hunting operations, chronic wasting disease, nontoxic shot, feeding and baiting, and others. Whether you agreed

with his positions or not, you had to respect his persistence and depth of commitment.

Jim Miller’s career accomplishments, service, and dedication led to numerous honors and awards. These included 2 Secretary of Agriculture Honor awards, the C. W. Watson award from the Southeastern Association, Mississippi Wildlife Federation Governors’ Conservationist of the Year, TWS honorary membership, the Walter “Howdy” Howard award (for wildlife damage work) and the wildlife professions’ most prestigious award, the Aldo Leopold Memorial Award, in 2007.

These are but a few of the memories we are left with now that Jim has passed. But we and our profession are stronger for having had him in our midst. One colleague wrote “we have lost a great one.” His MSU department chair described Jim as “the consummate ambassador for our profession, department, and university.” Another colleague honored Jim by serving a wild turkey dinner the night he heard the sad news.

We will all miss Jim and cherish memories of him in our own way. I like Rick Kaminski’s comment on hearing the news: “Aldo Leopold has already shaken hands with him and told him good job my friend.” Jim would like that.

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