

Bird man of Southwest Florida

Professor lives to learn and teach about the wild things

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

Jerome A. "Jerry" Jackson plunges into his jam-packed office on a quest that would discourage most mortals.

He maneuvers past the whisky bottle shaped like an ivory-billed woodpecker, shipped to him as a token of respect for his acclaimed book, "In Search of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker."

He moves past photos of his six children, past books he's written, stacks of paper, boxes of correspondence and assorted birds' nests. Past photos he's shot in Cuban mountains and remote Southern swamps where he's heard, but never seen, the elusive (and likely extinct) ivory-billed woodpecker.

He even has to slip past boxes of movies used in an undergraduate class, "Issues in Science and Technology," which explores the science behind big-name films - wolf habits and habitats depicted in "Never Cry Wolf," for example, or the clown fish and coral reefs from "Finding Nemo."

Finally he tracks down his quarry, hoisting aloft a chunk of metal and wood, a prize that bears the inscription: The Margaret Morse Nice Medal for Lifetime Contributions to Ornithology, 2008.

Jackson - an FGCU professor of ecological sciences and former Whitaker Eminent Scholar in Science - won't say it, but it's the Oscar of ornithology, one of the most prestigious awards an ornithologist can receive.

Given annually by the Wilson Ornithological Society "to individuals with significant contributions to science and ornithology," the medal celebrates Jackson's lifetime of discovery and achievement. In other words, this award is big - unlike his office, which measures about 10 feet by 8 feet. Within this Lilliputian habitat resides a leviathan mind, with a passion for learning and teaching to match.

"He has ambitious plans for what you need to learn, and he doesn't let up on you," says Patty Borden, who has studied ornithology and biogeography with him. Borden is a student with undergraduate and graduate degrees, returning after years away from academia to gain a contemporary understanding of environmental science.

"Dr. Jackson has a remarkable capacity to invoke a sense of wonder and awe in the natural world," she says. "He subtly transforms all of the students in our class into stewards of the earth. And his enthusiasm and insatiable curiosity are contagious. At the end of each class, we all wish we could stay for even just a few more moments."

After 30 years at Mississippi State University, Jackson came to FGCU a decade ago, sharing his enthusiasm with students, while teaching them to approach science devoid of wishful thinking or fantasy.

He demonstrated that approach two years ago, when Cornell University ornithologists introduced a low-quality videotape of a bird they claimed was an ivory-billed woodpecker in an Arkansas forest.

The revelation brought instant acclaim and international excitement, but Jackson, ignoring the potential dip in his own popularity, studied the evidence more skeptically. He concluded that his colleagues likely had mistaken the more common pileated woodpecker for the ivory-billed. (A year earlier,



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Dr. Jerry Jackson with a Whimbrel.

after years of research and serving on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ivory-Billed Woodpecker Advisory Committee, Jackson had published a book on the ivory-bill and was considered the expert on the species.)

In a report that gained national and international prominence, he called the faulty sighting, "faith-based ornithology," which earned him no love at Cornell, he recalls, but garnered the respect of scientists from around the world, who studied the evidence and concurred with Jackson's conclusions.

That's not the role he relishes most, he concedes.

"The joy - and yes, I mean real joy - that I find in learning and teaching about the living world comes from student recognition of the tremendous diversity of life," he says.

He shares that joy for the natural world with radio listeners each weekday at 7:19 a.m. on WFCU-FM, 90.1 on the dial, concluding with his trademark line: "With the Wild Things, I'm Dr. Jerry Jackson."

FGCU Professor Emeritus William Hammond, a celebrated scholar and teacher in his own right, calls him, "the Godfather of all the wild things. I like just about everything about him. He's a gifted teacher, a gifted scholar, a gifted parent, a gifted photographer. And he's world-renowned for his work on woodpeckers."

If you're a wild thing, a student or a fellow scientist, you couldn't have a better champion - unless you're an invasive species, such as the black spiny-tail iguana.

An invasive species expert and member of the National Invasive Species Advisory Committee, Jackson studied and helped Lee County officials determine how to rid Gasparilla Island of thousands of the destructive pests, beginning three years ago, encouraging them to take a broader approach than merely trapping or shooting them.

Pointing out that iguanas can lay 80 eggs at a time, have no natural predators here, may carry salmonella and have other unpleasant habits, he rethought

the approach to eradication, suggesting that the burgeoning population be attacked in the winter, when it's most vulnerable.

By closing their nesting burrows and "getting rid of exotic plants that they're feeding on (especially Brazilian pepper)," he told National Geographic News, "we could exercise a natural control over them, to some extent."

That's simply applied science, one of Jackson's many talents, says Win Everham, professor of environmental studies.

"He really is an eminent scholar," Everham says. "He has such a deep background, he knows so much, he has written so much, and what I think makes Jerry unique is the fact that he straddles the border between science and the humanities."

"Some of what he writes is very much for the general public, including some of his books and his radio program - and he's just such a good writer. It helps all of us other scientists at FGCU to have such a good example of someone who makes all those connections."

Jackson modestly ascribes that capacity to FGCU itself, which he calls "the most collegial place I've ever been."

Donna Price Henry, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, praises both his scholarship and his teaching, a skill at which many famous scholars fail, she says.

"Jerry is uniquely qualified to fit in here," she says. "Not only does he bring his eminence and world-renowned knowledge of ornithology, but he has this uncanny ability to teach at any level. I've seen him reach students who are pre-k, elementary, high school, university or grad students - and he can work so well with other scholars."

Jackson teaches in the university's lifelong learning program, the Renaissance Academy. He also accompanies middle-school students from urban settings to the Amazon River basin or the Arctic Circle each summer as part of the international Global Explorers program.

"He is," says Henry, "what anyone would call a master teacher, with a very strong scholarly expertise."

Jackson's zeal for learning and teaching seems imbedded in his DNA.

It's been that way his entire life, says his oldest son, Jerry Jackson Jr., photo editor at the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper.

"Our family trips were always different," his son says. "We always went to Iowa (where Jackson grew up), but I remember one summer when he was studying cliff swallows

or barn swallows, I think. We would stop at almost every bridge on the highway and look for them. So we were always having an adventure and doing stuff nobody else's kids did. For two Christmases, we volunteered as park rangers on Horn Island (off the Mississippi coast where the family relieved the rangers to give them vacations). One year half our presents went in the drink, trying to make the trip."

Inevitably, though, the family came back with the gift of greater experience and knowledge, gained by doing something nobody else would do.

Such is Jackson's approach to life, and one he sees no point in changing.

"I can't imagine a better life for me," he says. "Retirement? I'll never retire. This is too much fun."

— Reprinted from *Pinnacle magazine*, Florida Gulf Coast University

Facts of Life

- **Born:** Fort Benning, Ga.; raised in Burlington, Iowa
- **Age:** 65
- **Education:** Bachelor of science, Iowa State University; doctoral degree, University of Kansas
- **Favorite living bird species:** "The red-cockaded woodpecker, because it's endangered and we had one that lived in our house for 17 years. We found her as a fledgling with broken wings and legs, and had to have a permit to keep her. She became a member of the family, and became the oldest known red-cockaded woodpecker on record."
- **Favorite non-living bird species:** "I better not say the ivory-billed woodpecker, because I hope they still exist. Maybe it's the dodo bird, simply because it is so important to conservation today as an icon of extinction. They probably became extinct in about 1600 A.D. It's the first species of anything known to have become extinct. Prior to the recognition that it was gone, the Catholic church believed God had created everything, and it would exist to the end of time. The idea that humans could cause extinction wasn't thought possible."
- **Family:** Dr. Bette Jackson, FGCU chair of biological sciences; six children, six grandchildren
- **Favorite adventure:** "Probably the first time I was in Cuba, 1987. I had been invited there in my capacity as a director of the International Council of Bird Preservation to evaluate the status of conservation in Cuba. For five weeks we had total freedom to go everywhere, and at the end received an engraved invitation to appear on a reviewing stand for the May Day parade with Fidel Castro."
- **Heroes:** "My wife is my hero, and beyond that maybe (renowned ornithologist) George Sutton and Jim Tanner (author of "The Ivory-Billed Woodpecker")."
- **Most important thing to do before you die or quit working:** "Who's going to do either? I want to see my kids grow up and be successful, hold my grandkids on my knee and take them into the field and show them some of the wonderful things in nature." ■



Great White Heron

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