

This week we lost Randy Morgan, a close friend and one of the best naturalists in Santa Cruz County, the state, and the country. The Land Trust's Sandhills Morgan Preserve, is rightfully named after him. Like the rarity of the Sandhills, called the Galapagos Islands of Santa Cruz County by none other than Dr. Peter Raven, Randy was a rare person, known to most of his friends as R.

R grew up in Soquel, where his parents, grandparents and earlier family had lived a long time growing fruit. This was a time when Soquel Creek would flood and R could catch steelhead by hand, out in the family's flooded fields, as steelhead were still very plentiful. Due to an early childhood sickness, R was confined inside one summer and spent most of the time looking outside at birds. This started his long love of birding. R was very active in our local bird club for many years and was just an amazing birder.

His curious mind and love of nature would not let him be satisfied with just knowing about birds so he embarked on learning about plants. R studied linguistics in college and not any of the biological sciences, so he was self-taught as a naturalist. I think his study of linguistics is why he could learn and remember so many plant, bird and insect names. R found many new plants not known before and many of the sites in our county where rare plants exist. He could identify every bird, plant and insect in our county, and I always relied on him to help me identify anything.

With his scientific drive and curious mind, he then started to study insects. He embarked on a rigorous ten-year study of insect populations and distribution in our county. One result of this study was the discovery of the Ohlone Tiger Beetle, now on the endangered species list. His insect, seed and plant collections are legendary. Most of his collections are found at the California Academy of Science or at the UCSC Natural History Museum. Our local Natural History Museum did a whole exhibit on his work.

More than a great naturalist R was a very practical and gentle person. This is the hard part to explain about R...he cared nothing about material things in life, he just loved nature and trying to understand it. He had little ego, he just loved science and the scientific process. He was just a very gentle person, the kind that takes in wounded birds. I think that is why so many in our community loved him, almost with a cult following. He would mentor anyone and always loved to talk about nature.

I will miss not being in the field with him and his excitement over finding some small plant that to any "normal" person looked like nothing. It will be hard to not think of him when I see a rare insect, plant or bird, but most of all I will always think of him when I see a turkey vulture soar high over head and dip it's wing, as R always saw himself in the turkey vulture, his totem bird.

See you out there R.

■ Robert Stephens