



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Neal Griffith Smith Oral History Interview, 1990

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	Neal Griffith Smith Oral History Interview
Identifier:	Record Unit 9584
Date:	1990
Extent:	3 audiotapes (Reference copies).
Creator::	Smith, Neal Griffith, 1937- , interviewee
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9584, Neal Griffith Smith Oral History Interview

Use Restriction

Restricted. Contact SIHistory@si.edu to request permission.

Historical Note

Neal G. Smith (1937-), an evolutionary biologist, joined the staff of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) in 1963. He was born on April 3, 1937, in Brooklyn, New York. He received his B.A. from St. John's University in 1958 while volunteering at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). He completed his graduate work in zoology at Cornell, where he received the M.A. in 1961 and the Ph.D. in 1963.

Smith's interest in zoology began early, when as a youth in Brooklyn he watched gulls at the New York City garbage dumps and joined local bird watching societies. He was first introduced to the ornithology profession when Eugene Eisenmann, whom he met on a birding trip, invited him to study gulls and volunteer at the American Museum of Natural History. His graduate research at Cornell led him to the Arctic for studies of the systematics of Arctic gulls (*Larus*). At the 1963 Ornithological Congress in Ithaca, New York, Smith met Martin H. Moynihan of the Smithsonian's Canal Zone Biological Area (CZBA), later to be renamed STRI. Moynihan invited Smith to work at Barro Colorado Island (BCI), the CZBA site in Panama for a six month appointment after he completed his dissertation in 1963, and Smith continued research at STRI for the remainder of his career, taking on administrative responsibilities as well. He became Assistant Director of Academic Planning in 1974, but spent most of his time following his research interests. Smith was a member of various scientific societies, including the American Ornithologists' Union, the Society for the Study of Evolution, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Almost all of Smith's research was in the Neotropics, studying the evolutionary biology of birds and insects, especially adaptations of behavioral, morphological, and physical features involved in species

recognition, competition, and parasitism. His first major research interest at STRI, which continues to this day, involves the interaction of *Urania fulgens*, a moth, and *Omphalea*, a liana. He soon became interested in the nesting behavior of colonial birds and their responses to parasites, focusing on BCI's abundant oropendolas, and their interaction with cowbirds, botflies, and wasps, and developed creative mechanisms for his actual examination of nests. He has also studied the great migrations of the Swainson's hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*), broad-winged hawk (*Buteo platypterus*), and turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*), especially their apparent fasting and subsequent usage of stored fat for extensive migrations.

Introduction

The Smithsonian Institution Archives began its Oral History Program in 1973. The purpose of the program is to supplement the written documentation of the Archives' record and manuscript collections with an Oral History Collection, focusing on the history of the Institution, research by its scholars, and contributions of its staff. Program staff conduct interviews with current and retired Smithsonian staff and others who have made significant contributions to the Institution. There are also interviews conducted by researchers or student on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Neal G. Smith was interviewed for the Oral History Collection because of his distinguished scientific career, and long tenure at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute as both researcher and administrator. Additional information about Smith can be found in the Records of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute which are also housed in Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Descriptive Entry

Neal G. Smith was interviewed in 1990 by Smithsonian Institution Archives historian, Pamela M. Henson, and the interview discusses his early interest in ornithology; experiences at the American Museum of Natural History; graduate work at Cornell University on Arctic gulls; studies of *Urania*, oropendolas and hawk migrations; and experiences at STRI. The consists of one interview recorded on 2.5 hours of tape and 68 pages of transcript.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Entomology
- Interviews
- Oral history
- Ornithologists
- Ornithology
- Tropical biology

Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Transcripts

Names:

American Museum of Natural History
Eisenmann, Eugene, 1906-1981
Henson, Pamela M., interviewer
MacArthur, Robert H.
Mayr, Ernst, 1904-2005
Moynihan, M.
Ricklefs, Robert Eric
Smith, Neal Griffith, 1937-
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Barro Colorado Island
Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Canal Zone Biological Area
United States. Canal Zone Biological Area, Barro Colorado Island

Geographic Names:

Barro Colorado Island (Panama)

Container Listing

Interviews

Interviews

Interview 1: June 6, 1990

Interviews

Covers family background; early interest in birding; meeting Eugene Eisenmann; volunteering at AMNH; comment on new systematics debate at AMNH; meeting Ernst Mayr; assisting Robert T. Clausen in the Botany Department while doing graduate work at Cornell University; extensive details of his thesis work studying the systematics of Arctic gulls, isolating mechanisms, and hybridization; interviews with Albert C. Smith and especially Leonard Carmichael for a job at STRI, then named the Canal Zone Biological Area; colleagues at AMNH; arrival at BCI; early interest in *Urania*; addition of Robert Louis Dressler to STRI's staff; influence of Eugene Eisenmann on Smith; interest in oropendolas and caciques; Smith's development of a mechanism for observing bird nests; extensive details of his study on the interaction of oropendolas, cowbirds, botflies and wasps; acquisition of a U.S. Air Force truck for easier observation; increasing complexity of the study and concerns regarding self-deception; study of the great hawk migrations; counting, mapping routes, and observing energy utilization and fasting of Swainson's hawks and Broad-winged hawks; description of cloud streets; return to *Urania* studies and details of the interaction of *Urania* and *Omphalea*; spinoffs and benefits of *Urania* research; "Spsishing" experiments and receipt of award for title of "Spsishing" paper; keeping track of questions for research; brief discussion of ecological and evolutionary approach vs. organismal approach to biological research; difficulties producing written accounts of all the informations gathered from research; reflections upon first arrival at BCI; pressures of life on the island and their effects on family life; reminiscences of Robert Helmer MacArthur, Robert E. Ricklefs, Martin L. Cody, Paul Slud, and others; relationships between researchers at STRI; brief story of how CZBA's name was changed to STRI; detailed story of U.S. Army's poison gas studies on San Jose Island; and interaction with General Manuel Noriega's men and the black vultures, as well as Noriega himself.

Interviews

Transcript, Pages 1-68 of audiotape recording, 2.5 hours.

Interviews

Audio Recordings of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.5 hours

Note:

- Original Masters: 5 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
- Reference Copies: 3 cassette audiotapes