

JIM FOWLER - FRIEND OF PATUXENT by Matthew C. Perry

During the 1960s, nature shows on television were not as numerous and available as they are now. For those of us that loved nature, the program “Wild Kingdom” was a must see on a weekly basis every Sunday night from 1963 to 1971. The show was sponsored by Mutual of Omaha and starred Dr. Marlin Perkins, Director of the Saint Louis (Missouri) Zoological Park, and his affable sidekick, Jim Fowler. Dr. Perkins usually had a suit on as he narrated the show, but Fowler looked like he had just returned from an African safari with very stylish field clothes. If there was a large snake or an alligator to capture Jim was quick to go into action, while Dr. Perkins stayed out of the fray, but with confidence that Jim would be successful in any capture of any critter. It became a common joke of the show with Dr. Perkins stating, “I’ll wait here....”

My first involvement with Jim Fowler was in 1981, when he agreed to give some biologists from Patuxent a personal tour of the wildlife areas of Wild World on Central Avenue (now Six Flags). We loaded into a hay wagon pulled by a tractor with Jim having a good time as guide. At that time Wild World had many large animals including African lions, African elephants, and other exciting exotic wildlife for the visitors. These animals were moved from the park when new management put more emphasis on amusement rides and water slides, with less emphasis unfortunately on wildlife viewing and conservation.



Jim Fowler leading tour at Wild World for wildlife biologists in 1981.

Jim Fowler had a close connection with Patuxent Research Refuge and was especially friendly with Patuxent assistant biologist and self-made naturalist, Lennie Jones. Lennie remembers that “Fowler was a fun person to be around. He was a genuine wildlife guy, and one who had done credible research on raptors in the Beltsville, Maryland, area.” Fowler was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1932, but grew up in the Falls Church Virginia area.

When we were planning the Fiftieth Anniversary of Patuxent in 1989, we also were in the midst of planning for the National Wildlife Visitor Center. We had plans to feature three species of mega fauna (bald eagle, whooping crane, and gray wolf) on the grounds of the Visitor Center property on the South Tract of the refuge. Fowler had a personal pack of wolves in Georgia and was willing to advise us on the best way to display them in a wild environment, unlike a zoo. Unfortunately, we did not get approval to have live animals at the Visitor Center, although we temporarily had some young wolf pups we were raising for the purpose.

We invited Fowler to join us for our Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration and he and Lennie Jones conducted a short nature walk for the young folks and their parents. Lennie had a collection of captive reptiles and strategically placed some of them under logs and other natural materials so that Jim and Lennie could find them for the kid's unexpected exciting findings.



Naturalist, Lennie Jones, with TV Celebrity, Jim Fowler, at Patuxent Research Refuge 50th anniversary in 1989.

That night we had a large banquet and of course Jim Fowler was our after-dinner speaker. Lennie's fondest funny memory of Fowler was at the dinner presentation when they shared the podium during Lennie's introduction of Jim. Lennie had a little surprise that Jim and Lennie had not rehearsed or totally discussed. Jim had asked Lennie to bring an attractive "herp" (reptile or amphibian) as a prop for discussion. Lennie stated later, "being Marlins' critter-catchin' guy all over the globe, I assumed he was real familiar with snake species. Wrong. With no prior prep, I removed a gentle Sinaloan milk snake from a bag and placed it in his hand. It immediately headed up the long trek of his sport coat sleeve. He absolutely panicked! He hid his fear from the crowd, but bent down and whispered in my ear, "Lennie, are you kidding!?!? A tame coral snake?!?" I quickly and quietly identified the beautiful critter as the very similar but harmless milk snake, and we resumed the discussion with the excited audience.

In 1998, Patuxent received a beautiful bronze sculpture of a life-sized wolf pack that prominently was displayed at the entrance of the Visitor Center. Jim Fowler arranged through a friend in Florida to have live wolves at the Visitor Center for the dedication event. Fowler conducted three shows with the wolves that day and the event was so popular that the staff closed the gates to cars and many people walked in from Powder Mill Road. It remains the most popular one-day event for the Visitor Center thanks to live wolves and the presence of Jim Fowler. Some staff members still have tee shirts with a wolf design that was signed by Fowler.

Repeats of the Wild Kingdom show were aired in the 1970-80s and a few new ones were produced. When Marlin Perkins died in 1985, Jim Fowler became the host. Jim also was regularly seen on the Johnny Carson Show and the NBC Today Show. He invariably had an animal with him or his assistant would rapidly appear with one. There were many unexpected moments that Jim Fowler endured on television just like he did for our Fiftieth Anniversary celebration with a harmless milk snake. He is a great worldwide asset to wildlife.



Jim Fowler at podium with Lennie Jones and milk snake, Fiftieth Anniversary, 1989



Lynda Garrett and Lennie Jones holding snake, Fiftieth Anniversary, 1989.