

**John Joseph Fritz
1935-2008**

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It was predawn, 3 January 2009, and four of us from the Tobay party were spending the first light portion of the Southern Nassau Christmas Bird Count parked in the southwest corner of lot 2 at Jones Beach West End, scanning the dunes for owls. It had become our tradition to start here, though within someone else's territory, and each year for more than a decade we'd invariably be greeted by John's gruff but good-natured voice from behind— "Hey! Are you guys poaching in our territory already?" But this year that voice did not come, and this saddened me deeply; as we drove out of the lot towards our party's rendezvous point, I was reminded again of the sense of loss I had initially felt back on September 11th of the previous year when told that John Fritz had passed away. And it was not just the personal loss of a good friend, but also the realization that our region would no longer have the benefit of John's spirit and tenacity, of his environmental conviction and awareness. A very important regional motivator had become still.

Most of us knew John as a birder, but for many years he was known for other things. Born in Flushing, Queens, on 17 August 1935, John grew up in that borough of New York City. As a young man, John served in the U. S. Army, and it was during a tour in Europe that he met Gerta Oppel, whom he married and with whom he raised two daughters, Coreen and Chris, in Deer Park, Long Island. John had a very distinguished career as a New York City fireman, earning a reputation for personal courage among peers who knew this quality better than most. Beginning in 1971, the Fritz family maintained a cabin on 130 acres in Otsego County, where John enjoyed many kinds of out-door activities.

During this period, a good deal of John's time revolved around sport fishing, and his involvement in environmental concerns and controversies began to flourish. He became well known and respected as a strong advocate for fishermen's rights and actively supported many important initiatives concerning the appropriate uses and conservation of public lands. As a dynamic long-time member of the New York State Fishing Advisory Board and an instrumental Trustee of Suffolk County Parks, John set a standard for all environmental enthusiasts to follow. He was also actively involved with many other organizations, too numerous to list, but which did include a stint as the Conservation Committee Chairman for NYSOA. In recent decades, John's input was constantly sought across a broad range of environmental issues, fellow participants appreciating his knack for proposing and marshalling support for well intentioned and practical resolutions to even the thorniest of problems.

It wasn't until the mid-1980s that John's emphasis began shifting from scales to feathers, and his interest in birding became as strong as his fishing enthusiasm had been. His quest for birds within the ABA area took him all over the country and to Alaska several times in pursuit of what had become, in recent years, a quickly diminishing list of possible new species. I remember an August 2006 midnight ride through heavy rain to see a Western Reef-Heron in southern Maine, only to have one show up in Brooklyn less than a year later—John's comment was something like "Just think of the gas we could have saved if we'd only known, but I guess we would have gone anyway, huh?"

Even after John's tempo and wanderlust had been slowed by ailments, he undertook trips to Arizona and Florida to at last catch up with old nemeses, Northern Jacana and Bananaquit, respectively. I can't recall how many times I'd kidded him that he could go a few hundred miles further south and see dozens of Jacanas and Bananaquits and throw in some Cotingas and Toucans and..., but he would have none of it—the southern U.S. border was his limit. His ABA total was one of the highest, an impressive 773, and north of the border he was very well known and respected within birding circles.

That respect, however, was most notably apparent in his home turf here in New York. In the field it was always a pleasure joining forces with John and Gerta, especially if it included sharing a rarity somewhere (many of us enjoyed John's Hammond's Flycatcher at Jones Beach back in late November 2001 until a Merlin decided it would make a tasty breakfast), or perhaps it was just doing a sea watch on the deck at Cupsogue County Park, margaritas in hand (no wonder those watches were so productive), while waiting for Shai to find us another Arctic Tern out on the flats.

After his family, John's love was the outdoors. We have all benefited, whether we know it or not, from the energy and perseverance he expended over the years on numerous issues concerning public policy and the interplay between appreciative naturalists and those with less environmental awareness. It seemed appropriate that he passed away while out birding, and I know that while I am out in the field I will remain thankful that I had the opportunity to know John and to share in the benefits he helped provide to all of us birders.

