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Obituary

In memoriam – Roy R. Snelling (30 September 1934 - 21 April 2008)

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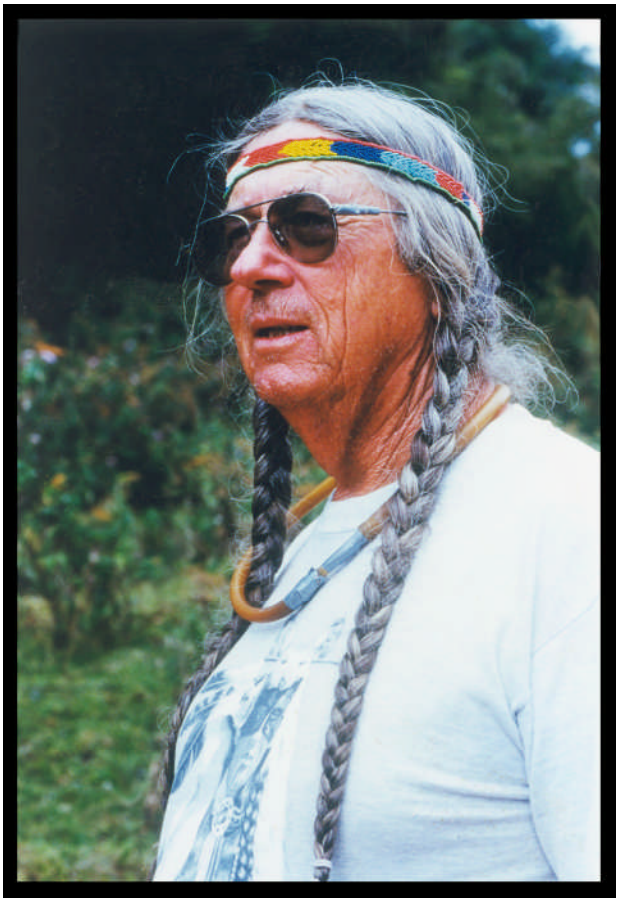
Roy Snelling, who turned a boyhood fascination with insects into a lifelong study of wasps, bees and especially ants, has died. Roy was 73. According to his son Gordon, Roy died in his sleep, apparently after suffering a heart attack, only a few days into a planned three-month expedition in Kenya. He was there to collect material of ants and bees, and to increase generally the currently meager knowledge of that surprisingly little-studied insect fauna. Professionally, Roy served as curator of Hymenoptera, and as a collections manager, for the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Outside of work, he was married and divorced twice, and is survived by fellow myrmecologist Gordon, another son, Michael Duffy, a daughter, Shelley Duffy, and a brother, Clarence Snelling.

Roy's interest in insects began in Turlock, California. As a boy, he spent his lunch breaks in the fields near his school "out poking around, looking for critters," Gordon noted in a recent statement to the Los Angeles Times. Roy's parents were practical farm-folk, and at first not convinced of the wisdom of his choosing to become an entomologist. But, Gordon recounted, "he became successful at it, and his parents saw it wasn't a lark." After attending community college in Modesto, California for a year and a half, Roy left formal schooling and subsequently trained himself. In 1959, after a stint in the Army, he worked with the California Department of Agriculture, inspecting farm buildings for plant pests and recommending control procedures. He joined the staff of Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in 1963 and retired in 1993, but remained on as an active emeritus researcher and curator till the end.

I wished to include here some tribute to what to Myrmecological News readers was Roy's "other love", bees, so I wrote my former professor and Roy's mellitological colleague, Prof. Charles Michener, renowned bee researcher at the University of Kansas, for his thoughts. In response, Mich contributed this (somewhat edited): "Roy became interested in insects and more specifically bees and wasps when he was a kid living in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Quite early he learned about the activities of professionals in the field; he published his first paper in 1953 (SNELLING 1953), when barely out of high school. It was several years later, 1963, when Roy first published on ants, one of the series of revisions of fire ants to hit the presses over the last 45 years (SNELLING 1963). Ants were the group on which he ultimately spent most of his research time."



Roy in 2007 (with "pooter," perhaps preparing to capture "some damned *Myrmica*" or preferably, a genus that he liked)

"Although from the first, he was interested in the nesting biology and other aspects of behavior of aculeate Hymenoptera, his main contributions were on systematics; like most systematists he was an active and enthusiastic collector. His work on bees, mostly systematic, led to 45 publications that appeared from 1954 to 1997. He published on numerous groups of bees, but was the major contributor during the second half of the last century to the literature on certain groups. Thus for the genus *Hylaeus* (Colletidae), he published numerous revisional papers, with emphasis on the North American and African faunas, and he clarified the subgeneric classification for those areas as well as for tropical America. For the genus *Centris* and its allies (Anthophorinae), his works include important revisions, and especially, he clarified the subgenera, which are important among bees because the genera tend to be large and the subgenera useful. At one time he had a major interest in the cleptoparasitic subfamily Nomadinae. He was thus an important contributor to the field of melittology; his help in furthering this field as well as myrmecology, etc., will be missed."

North American ant taxonomists George and Jeanette Wheeler, producers of the well-known and user-friendly ant guides for North Dakota and Nevada, befriended Roy after they "retired" to Nevada.

Roy observes a nest entrance of *Myrmecocystus* in the Arizona desert, with students of "Ant Course."

Roy's publications on ants were diverse, both taxonomically and in scope, ranging from isolated descriptions of new taxa, to partial genus revisions, to regional faunas and at least one revision of an entire genus (*Myrmecocystus*). In geographical coverage, California and western North America, including Mexico, were predominant, but several of his publications dealt with the ants of Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central America, South America, Asia and Africa. During his 30-year career at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Snelling amassed a premier research collection of bees and ants.

In a 1965 Los Angeles Times article, Roy pointed out to the reporter what readers of this journal know all too well, namely, that for all their abundance and our proximity to them, "we know very little about the ant." Roy worked diligently to rectify that dearth of knowledge. His publications were largely in the vein of sorting out the rampant alpha-taxonomic confusion that theretofore reigned in virtually every group he studied, and these improvements were often augmented by careful ecological observations that added greatly to both the credibility and the overall value of his taxonomy. Two largely concordant, but even together, imperfectly complete lists of Roy Snelling's publications can be found online, one at the LACM website <http://www.nhm.org/research/entomology/associates/snellingpubs.html> and another at Antbase.org, <http://atbi.biosci.ohio-state.edu:210/hymenoptera/taxon_catalog.list_publications_by_author?id=765>. The second of these lists makes many of the publications available as pdfs.

I am truly saddened by Roy's death. We had been collegial friends since the mid-1970s, when I was a masters degree student at the University of Kansas. Over the years, I sent every myrmecological manuscript I wrote to Roy first, before submission to a journal, for his incisive and helpful commentary. More recently, I especially appreciated the several phone calls a year I got from Roy during the 1990s and first few 2000s, when for a variety of reasons, I was not able to be very active myrmecologically. The conversations were always full of interesting and by no means exclusively myrmecological lore. I most appreciate that he kept the torch of my ant career lit for me. Particularly poignant to me during this time was Roy's effort to set the record straight on the status of some Florida *Dorymyrmex* that I had described, and that C.F. Johnson mysteriously synonymized, with some evident hanky-panky in type designations! See SNELLING (1995) for details.

Roy was personally linked to more myrmecologists than I can name, but figuring especially among them was "Ants of North America" author William S. Creighton, with whom Roy had a long and productive professional interaction. Dr. Creighton's very important ant collection is now housed at the Museum of Natural History in Los Angeles, where as we have seen, Roy built up one of the most important ant collections in the world during his many years as curator of Hymenoptera for that institution. It can be said that Roy himself became the living reference on the taxonomy of ants of North America after Creighton's death.

As we have seen, Roy was not only an ant taxonomist, but also a respected bee and wasp taxonomist. Further, outside of entomology, he was an active proponent of Native American causes, was an avid and knowledgeable connoisseur of classical music, enjoyed a variety of ethnic foods (especially Mexican!) and good beer, and not the least, was an outspoken atheist. Readers of this memorial may appreciate other personal memories of Roy posted by colleagues at Alex Wild's "Myrmecos Blog" <http://myrmecos.wordpress.com/2008/04/23/in-memory-of-roy-snelling/>.

Since Roy was never (at least outwardly) one to place much importance on ceremony, and always seemed one genuinely to appreciate dark humor, I feel I can suggest here (in jest!) – Maybe we should get together a Roy Snelling Festschrift! Roy learned truly and utterly to hate Festschrift-making during his stint as editor of the recent Festschrift honoring Edward O. Wilson (SNELLING & al. 2007). I hope this quip gives him a good, hearty laugh, wherever he is. I'll really miss him, but at least, I am somewhat cheered to know that he died while on an ant collecting

The shared smiles of these Kenyan children and especially, of Roy, show a side of him many of us came to know only as adults, his eagerness to teach others about nature and the clear joy he derived from doing so.

An ant-collecting expedition in the California desert. – Left to right: Arizona State University myrmecologist Bob Johnson, Roy's daughter-in-law and son Cindy and Mike Duffy, grandson James (son of Gordon), Harvard myrmecologist Stefan Cover, Roy's son and fellow myrmecologist Gordon, and the dearly departed Roy.

expedition, as I think he would wish it (and as would perhaps many of us).

A final point, the accompanying photo includes three generations of Snellings together, plus other anty folk, out in the California desert on an ant-hunt. If there's such a thing as a myrmecology gene, this is clearly indicative of the dominant alleles at Roy's myrmecology locus! Corroborating this, a chapter revising US *Neivamyrmex* in the aforementioned Wilson Festschrift was coauthored by Gordon and Roy, and Gordon's son James did the illustrations! Too, one could say that in view of the innumerable, unrelated myrmecologists whose careers Roy aided and abetted, his altruism towards non-kin (very un-antlike) was quite an extraordinary thing.

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