

**Robert E. Beck, Jr.  
1944-2008**

Robert E. Beck, Jr., noteworthy conservationist in the Mariana Islands, died of melanoma on Guam on 24 May 2008 at the age of 63. Born on 2 September 1944 and raised in Hagerstown, Maryland, Bob first came to Guam in 1974 to teach high school, then returned to the States in 1978 and attended graduate school at the University of Tennessee, where he studied under Dr. James Tanner of Ivory-billed Woodpecker fame. He returned to Guam in 1981 and was hired as a wildlife biologist with the Division of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources (DAWR) in late 1982. He became DAWR's wildlife section supervisor in 1990 and remained in that job until retiring in 2003.

Bob's passion was ornithology. After arriving at DAWR, he immediately began efforts to establish captive breeding programs for several of Guam's endemic birds, which were rapidly approaching extinction for reasons that were as yet unknown. This involved many activities during the 1980s, including working closely with the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria to gain the participation of U.S. mainland zoos, building and operating a breeding facility at DAWR so that some birds could be retained on Guam, capturing the birds, and finally organizing their transport to the mainland. Bob deserves particular recognition for his role in bringing Guam rails into captivity before this flightless species was lost. He was also responsible for capturing the last remaining Micronesian kingfishers of the Guam subspecies (which someday may be elevated to a full species), but failed to catch enough Guam flycatchers and Guam rufous fantails before both disappeared much more rapidly than anticipated. Descriptions of this work are chronicled in Mark Jaffe's book *And No Birds Sing: the Story of an Ecological Disaster in a Tropical Paradise* (1994, Simon & Schuster, New York). There is little doubt in my mind that Bob's efforts prevented extinction of the rail and the kingfisher. The breeding program for rails has been highly successful since its initiation, with hundreds of birds produced and as many as 17 zoos participating. Many of the rails were used in attempts to reestablish the species back into the wild on Rota and Guam. Hopefully, these efforts will still succeed someday.

Bob also worked hard over the years to preserve Guam's dwindling population of Mariana crows. In 1986, he pioneered efforts to protect the nesting trees of this species from brown tree snakes and was long involved in the planning efforts to supplement the population with crows from Rota, a project that was controversial to many.

Bob's other great contribution was his tireless efforts to protect the native forests on Guam's military lands, which held much of the island's remaining wildlife. He constantly pushed the Air Force and Navy to comply with federal laws for environmental protection, especially the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act. One of his biggest successes was opposing the clearing of three 250-ha tracts of limestone forest on military lands in



Beck (right) snakeproofing a nest tree.

northern Guam during the late 1980s for an “over-the-horizon” radar system that probably would never have been built anyway because of its outdated technology. Bob was one of the important reasons why almost no habitat was lost on the island’s military bases during the 1980s and 1990s.

Bob was a dedicated conservationist and Guam was fortunate to have someone of his abilities helping protect its natural resources. I personally have many fine memories of working with Bob, including canoeing with him in the stillness of dawn on Fena Reservoir preceding our surveys of common moorhens, counting Mariana swiftlets at the main colony on U.S. Naval Magazine on many a warm tropical evening, watching shorebirds for many hours with him and always hoping to find another rarity, and listening to him describe the details of the Endangered Species Act. He was a respected colleague and good friend, who’ll be missed. He is survived by his son Erik, his daughter Joanna, and many other family members and friends.

—*Gary J. Wiles*, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 600 Capitol Way North, Olympia, Washington 98501, U.S.A.