

## Alan Robert Olsen (1946-2018)<sup>1</sup>

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In 1966, Alan Robert Olsen (1946 - 2018) told a psychologist working for the newly formed Peace Corps that a particular Rorschach “ink blot” test looked like an amblypygid. The psychologist was likely confused upon hearing a reference to this obscure order of arachnids, but luckily they approved Olsen to join the first class of Peace Corps volunteers sent to Micronesia. Olsen soon found himself in a village in Palau’s Ngatpang State where almost no one understood any English, all electricity was from a diesel generator, and Palauans had not yet widely started to use chairs in their houses. He would spend much of his three years in Palau teaching English and learning about the organisms and environments of Babeldaob. Olsen split his Peace Corps days between Ngatpang and Ngerchelongs States, where he met future collaborators and supervisors, including Faustina Rehuher and the late Demei Otobed, as well as his future wife Angelina Smaserui.

Olsen was a few years into a Bachelor’s degree in entomology at the University of Arizona when he enrolled in the Peace Corps. He demonstrated an interest in insects and other arthropods at an early age— he had been earning extra money for years before entering college by selling U of A students insects he had collected and pinned himself so they could round out their assigned insect collections. In 1970 Angie and Alan moved to Tucson together, where he completed his Bachelor’s degree, and began coursework for a Master’s. However, their family was growing, so in 1972 Olsen

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took a job working as an entomologist for the U.S. Food & Drug Administration in Seattle, Washington.

Olsen worked for the FDA for just over 30 years, moving from Seattle to Los Angeles to San Francisco, and finally ending up as the director of the FDA's microanalytics branch in Washington, DC. During this time he became an expert on identifying insect species from their shattered remains in processed foods, as well as other potential food contaminants. Olsen's large body of work during this time is synthesized in the edited volume he spearheaded, "Fundamentals of Microanalytical Entomology: A Practical Guide to Identifying Filth in Foods" (1996). Although much of Olsen's professional work for the FDA revolved around the detection and characterization of contaminants (which he frequently referred to as "filth," e.g., Olsen, 1982a, 1996, 1998, 2002), he also made contributions to our understanding of Micronesian natural history during this period. These contributions included a new record of an invasive fly in Palau (Olsen & Sidebottom, 1990; Olsen et al., 1993), and novel observations of the mating behavior of the charismatic Golden Orbweaver spider (Olsen, 1993). Olsen also described the first species named in honor of a Palauan woman (his wife): the mite *Lardoglyphus angelinae* (Olsen, 1982b).

After retiring from the FDA, Alan and Angie moved back home to Palau permanently in 2003, at which point Alan rapidly became essential to the conservation biology and scientific community. This was a period in Palau's history of rapid environmental change and development, as the "Compact Road" around Babeldaob was being constructed. Shortly after his return to Palau, he served as a crucial member of the steering committee of the Palau Ecosystem-Based Management project, and the Palau National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan Ad Hoc Committee. He participated in the 2004 - 2005 renovation of the Belau National Museum and served as the head of the Natural History section beginning in 2006. In this role, he frequently helped visiting scientists, including University of Guam Master's student (and Palauan) Olivia Idechiil when she and Dr. Ross Miller were doing work on aphids and ants in Babeldaob (Idechiil et al. 2007). Olsen's behind-the-scenes friendship, mentoring and practical support for generations of Palauan and foreign conservationists will leave an enduring legacy.

Olsen contributed to our understanding of both invasive (Olsen & Miles, 2005) and native (Olsen, 2009) ant distributions, but increasingly shifted his focus from entomology to ornithology. Along with his Belau National Museum colleague Milang Eberdong, and colleagues from the Palau Conservation Society, Koror State, and beyond, Olsen spent thousands of hours surveying the birds of Palau (Olsen & Eberdong, 2009, 2014, 2017; Otobed et al., 2018; Pratt et al., 2010), including the first Palau-wide survey of nesting mounds of the threatened Micronesian Megapode (Olsen et al. 2016). Olsen was instrumental in the creation of the Palau Bird Records Committee, which was established to review reports of rare or otherwise noteworthy birds in Palau (Otobed et al. 2018). He was heavily involved in the "State of Palau's Birds" report (Belau National Museum, 2011-2017), and Palau's active eBird program. Olsen and Eberdong's bird surveying efforts starting in 2006 (Olsen & Eberdong, 2009) and their advocacy work were instrumental in establishing the Ngerutechei Important Bird Area (IBA) in Ngaremlengui State, an area which protects important habitats for Palau's endemic birds and other species. This area is among the first bird sanctuaries in Palau and its formation is testament to the efficacy of both Olsen's passion for natural history, and his involvement in the community of Palau. Over 2015-2018 he was tireless in his advocacy for the protection of the newly discovered and threatened Northern Peleliu Lkes IBA for migratory shorebirds (Birdlife International, 2019).

Olsen was fond of saying "That's part of it," in a variety of contexts. "That" could be negative or positive, but was usually necessary and/or inevitable. Bringing donuts to meetings, taking a break to sip canned iced cappuccinos on the tailgate while surveying birds, taking the time to 'talk stories' with the members of one's community: these were all "part of it," as were dealing with bureaucracy or getting rained out of field work. Olsen was also fond of saying "a lesser mind would be bored by this," with respect to the minutiae of laboratory work and insect identification, and endorsed "count

everything,” as an all-purpose panacea for natural history. Olson’s scientific contributions, and his broader outreach in Palau and beyond are all tribute to his inability to be bored, his insistence on counting everything, and his holistic understanding of how much was “part of it” when one does science within the dual contexts of a local community and a diffuse network of global experts. Olsen passed away peacefully but unexpectedly in 2018, leaving a rich legacy of science and natural history, and a tapestry of beloved family, friends, and colleagues. It is profoundly sad to lose a mentor, colleague, and friend like Olsen. But that’s part of it.

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