

Emlen wins prestigious Animal Behavior Society award

Cornell University

The Animal Behavior Society bestowed its highest honor on Cornell behavioral ecologist Stephen Emlen July 29 during its 48th annual meeting in Bloomington, Ind.

An expert on the social behavior of animals, Emlen, the Jacob Gould Schurman Professor of Behavioral Ecology Emeritus in the Department of Neurobiology and Behavior, received the Distinguished Animal Behaviorist Award, which "recognizes an outstanding career in animal behavior."

"The fact the recognition comes from one's peers makes the award especially meaningful," said Emlen, who won the society's Exemplar Award for "major long-term contributions to animal behavior" in 2006.

After receiving his B.A. from Swarthmore College in 1962 and his Ph.D. in zoology from the University of Michigan in 1966, Emlen joined Cornell in the fall of that year. His research interests have been many and varied. "I keep shifting what I have done," he said. "I found that each decade there were new possibilities of what questions could be answered."

Early in his career, Emlen studied how night-flying birds use stars and magnetic fields to navigate during their migrations. From there, he tackled mating systems in birds, running tests to understand why some birds form monogamous pair bonds, while others, both male and female, are polygamous. Later Emlen developed one of the first predictive frameworks integrating ecology and sexual selection to understand the diversity of mating systems found in nature.

Emlen has also explored species where sex roles are reversed. In Panama he studied birds called jacanas, a species in which females are the larger and more dominant sex, while males are the primary caretakers of the eggs and young.

For the last 25 years, Emlen has observed bird species that engage in bi-parental care and cooperative breeding to understand social dynamics of animal family systems, findings which he believes also have relevance to human families.

"Bird families have more structural parallels to human families than do most primates," he said, adding that 5 to 10 percent of bird species form multigenerational families, where the young associate preferentially with their parents throughout their lives. Such cooperative breeders as bee-eaters and social weaverbirds, for example, live in familial colonies, recognize their kin and work cooperatively together to rear the young.

Emlen has used his observations to study patterns of conflict and cooperation

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among avian family members and has discovered that when a stable pair bond is broken (through death or separation), and a new replacement pair bond is formed, it often leads to increased conflict and a reduction in cooperation among the family members.

"The changes we see in avian families closely parallel changes reported after divorce and remarriage in human families," he said. "Being able to predict these changes in birds has implications for understanding human divorce and stepfamily dynamics, where familial interactions often change in similarly predictable ways," he added.

A growing number of family counselors now incorporate Emlen's theories in their practices, he said.

Among many distinctions, Emlen is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences. He has been a Guggenheim fellow and a Fulbright senior scholar, and has received the William Brewster Medal from the American Ornithologist's Union.

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