

In Memoriam: Vagn Flyger (1922-2005)

Wildlife Biologist

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Vagn Flyger ('52 MS Sci) had a thing for squirrels.

His doctoral research was about squirrels. His last research project, conducted in the late 1990s, explored the movement and mortality patterns of translocated urban-suburban squirrels. He kept squirrels as pets. He even ate a few.

"He was internationally known for his work on squirrels," says Lowell Adams, associate professor in the Department of Biological Resources Engineering at the University of Maryland, where Flyger taught from 1964 to 1987. "But he was widely read, and he knew lots of things about lots of things."

Flyger made his name by defining the factors underlying "The Great Squirrel Migration of 1968" (the critters had enjoyed a baby boom in 1967, and set out en masse in search of open spaces). But in addition to his pioneering work with nut-eating arboreal rodents, Flyger was among the first wildlife biologists to make use of tranquilizer dart guns when they were introduced in the late 1950s. (Prior to the invention of such "capture guns," animals were either trapped or killed for study.) Flyger's earliest experiments with dart guns involved deer and woodchucks, but he soon found himself in the Arctic, training his sights on seals, whales and polar bears—though he eventually gave up on the bears, for safety reasons. "Sometimes," says Lowell, "they charged."

Ever the innovator, Flyger developed a number of ingenious techniques for capturing and releasing animals in the wild. "He worked out a real good field technique for anaesthetizing squirrels using an empty mayonnaise jar with some paper towels in the bottom," notes Lowell. (The jars were just the right size for the furry subjects, and the paper towels were soaked in anaesthetic.) He was also known to smear Valium-spiked peanut butter on a tree in his Silver Spring, Md., backyard, waiting for unsuspecting squirrels to snack themselves into oblivion before outfitting them with tiny radio collars.

Williams died Jan. 9 at the age of 83. He is survived by his wife, daughter, and stepdaughter.

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