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# In Memoriam - Robert O. Stephenson (1945-2016)

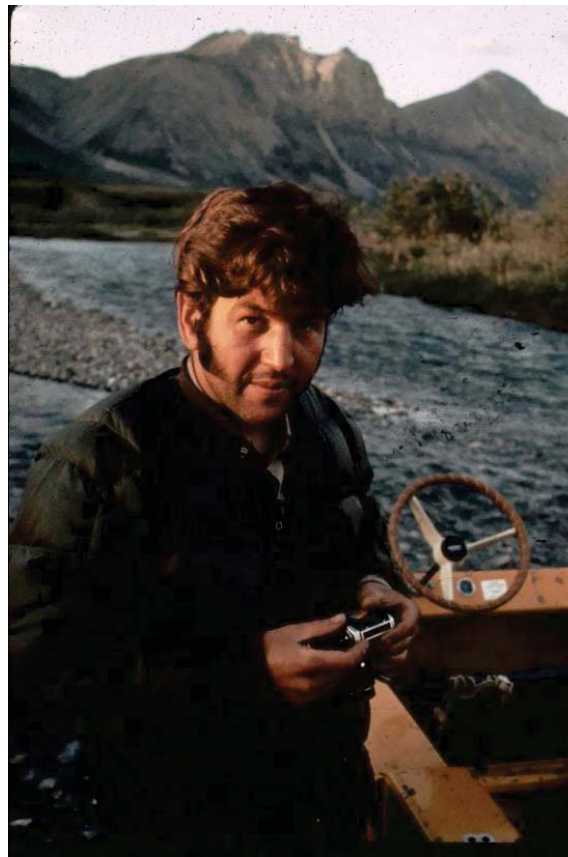
By Scott Brainerd, Dick Shideler, and John Trent

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Wildlife biologist Bob Stephenson passed away at home in his Goldstream cabin in Fairbanks, Alaska on October 5th. Born in Wisconsin on November 7th, 1945, he obtained his undergraduate degree in wildlife studies at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point. His career spanned several decades in Alaska, starting with his graduate studies at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, in 1967. His Master's thesis research focused on the food habits of arctic fox on St. Lawrence Island. Shortly after graduation in 1970, Bob began his career as a Furbearer Biologist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Fairbanks.

From the start, Bob had a knack for connecting with people in rural villages, and integrating their knowledge and insights into his research. This was the approach he took when he started his wolf study in Anaktuvuk Pass in 1971. Following a period of intensive wolf hunting on the North Slope during the 1950s and 1960s, there was concern that wolf populations had been severely reduced. With the permission of his supervisor, John Burns, Bob moved to Anaktuvuk to live among the Nunamiut and learn from them about wolf behavior and biology.

Bob bought one of the only two traditional sod houses remaining in the village, and field assistants recall sharing quarters with shrews, microtines, and



*Bob Stephenson working with wolves in the Brooks Range in the 1970s. Photo by ADF&G*

the occasional weasel. This adoption of a traditional house as well as embracing the constant stream of visitors, from little children to village elders, endeared him to the people of Anaktuvuk Pass. While in the village, Bob worked with Bob Ahgook, Justus Mekiana, and other knowledgeable Nunamiut hunters to learn the ways of the wolf. While camping with them and watching a wolf den he realized that they formed hypotheses and tested them with observation much as western scientists do. As a result, Bob's work was one of the first to integrate traditional knowledge with modern wildlife science. This model of full collaboration between "The First Alaskans"

and university-trained wildlife scientists has proven highly successful many times over in the ensuing decades since Bob's Anaktuvuk days.

While Bob learned to respect the knowledge and skills of his Nunamiut mentors, he also gave much back to the community of Anaktuvuk. With his background as a trained National Guard medic, Bob and community health aide, Bob Ahgook, nursed the entire village back to health during a severe outbreak of influenza, an act which forever endeared him to the community.

Bob Stephenson became widely known as ADF&G's wolf expert over the ensuing decades of his career and he authored or coauthored several papers and book chapters on the species from field studies conducted in southcentral, interior, and arctic Alaska. He was an early member of the IUCN wolf specialists



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## Robert Stephenson - Continued

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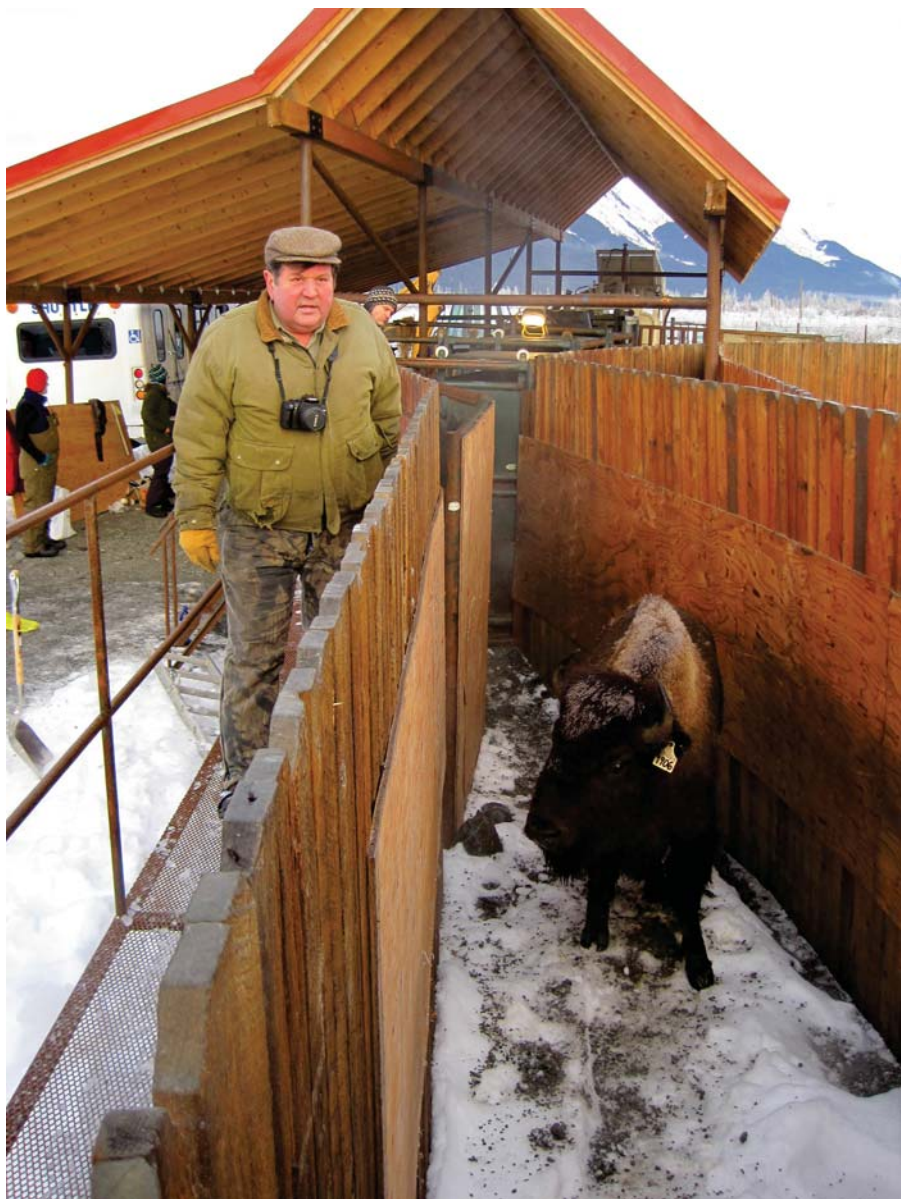
group, formed in 1978. In addition to wolves, Bob also studied lynx in the 1980s, when he developed methods for evaluating population status and the effects of harvest in interior Alaska. His results were instrumental in keeping the Canadian lynx from being listed as an endangered species in Alaska. His passion and dedication for this research is exemplified by the fact that, in order to save the ADF&G money during a period of tight funding, he bought an ultra-light aircraft kit with his own money, built it and taught himself to fly so that he could radio-track lynx.

His rapport with Native communities lead to him being assigned to work on wildlife management issues with the community of Fort Yukon and surrounding villages in the 1990s. He noted wetland habitat in the Yukon Flats was ideal habitat for wood bison. He also discovered and helped document Athabascan oral histories which contained references to the “the hefty one among timber,” a literal translation of one of several Athabascan names for wood bison. Through integration of Athabascan oral traditions and hard science based on carbon dating skeletal material, he was able to make a case for reintroducing wood bison to Alaska.

The road to wood bison reintroduction was hard and long, with several discouraging setbacks along the way. It is a testament to Bob’s vision, dedication and perseverance that 100 wood bison were finally restored to the Alaskan landscape in the spring of 2015, after two decades of effort. The 29th Alaska Legislature honored Bob’s career achievements and his role in wood bison restoration in 2015.

Although the restoration effort was the product of many dedicated individuals, the wild wood bison that roam Alaska today, and in the future, are his greatest legacy.

Bob Stephenson was a generous soul who gave much of himself to friends and to wildlife conservation. He had great impact on many lives during his career. He is sorely missed by his colleagues, fellow travelers, and by the communities he served with such dedication and passion.



*Bob handling wood bison at AWCC in Portage in 2010. Photo by Scott Brainerd*

