

## **Robert (Bob) Gasiorowski**

Royal Oak's nature community lost a good friend in May 2016 with the passing of Robert (Bob) Gasiorowski. The following are some recollections found in some of our past Chinquapin articles.

### **Personal recollection from Nature Society member, Katherine Howell:**

My life and Bob's crossed in two memorable ways. For thirteen years, I was a substitute teacher for the Royal Oak Public Schools. I was always delighted whenever I was called to Kimball High School to substitute for Bob. His classroom was a veritable nature preserve, filled with pots of exotic plants and a bevy of tanks and cages that housed dozens of water and land creatures. I always looked forward to my planning period, when I could explore his collections, unencumbered by the duties of teaching his students.

When my son Brian was 8 years old, I was his Cub Scout Den Mother. On a Saturday morning, I arranged to take my young charges on a nature hike through Quickstad Park, led by Bob Gasiorowski. As we walked down a path, we stopped by a bush. Bob took a hold of one of the leaves growing on the bush, broke it in half, and gently pulled the two sections apart. The almost invisible juices of the leaf stretched a good inch or more and the detached bottom section of the leaf appeared to floating in air!

Our hike ended in a clearing in the woods, across which Bob had earlier placed a special net to catch birds passing through the glade. Before our arrival, Bob had gently removed the birds from the net and placed them individually in brown paper grocery bags where, as he explained, they would be safe and calmed by the diffused light coming through the bag. One at a time, Bob Took out each bird, gently held it in his hands and told us its name and life story before releasing it to the woods. When he took out the last bird, he held it on its back in one hand. He gently rubbed the bird's belly and the bird appeared to go to sleep. Bob opened his fingers and the bird did not take flight! We were in awe! He explained that this phenomenon was due to a special wiring in the bird's nervous system and the "spell" would be broken if you touched the bird's feet. From a group of begging volunteers, Bob asked my son to step forward and touch the bird's feet. To the squealing delight of eight young boys, the bird took off in a flutter and returned to the depths of Quickstad Park.

I am honored to have known Bob Gasiorowski.

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**Personal recollection from Don Drife, Nature Society botanist:**

I met Bob in the summer of 1972 when a notice appeared in the *Royal Oak Daily Tribune* announcing a series of morning hikes in Quickstad Park. Bob served as the city naturalist and led the hikes. Each session began with a lecture by Bob in his classroom in Kimball [Royal Oak] High School and then we would head to Quickstad for a nature walk. Topics included: pond life, insects, birds, trees, wildflowers, mammals, and more. Bob shared his infectious passion for all facets of the natural world. The nature program ran for several years, adding summer evening walks and a Wednesday evening lecture program. I made my first public speaking presentation, with much encouragement and coaching from Bob, to this group. I also studied Environmental Science under Bob as a student at Kimball High School (now known as Royal Oak High School).

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**Personal recollection from Bob Muller, Nature Society naturalist:**

I met Bob in the summer of 1973. I was riding my bike down Maris Avenue, past the park, and saw a notice for an evening nature walk. No one else was on the nature walk so there was a long discussion with Bob on everything we saw. I had a strong interest in edible wild plants then and brought up something on every edible plant we saw. He asked me, right then, to speak at one of the Wednesday lectures. The resulting presentation made up of a slide show and samples to eat was my first public speaking attempt, my knees were actually shaking. This was my first natural history program. I doubt if I would be doing talks today without the encouragement Bob gave me. On his nature walks Bob allowed others with knowledge of something we came across to become for a moment the naturalist. Don and I and many others did this often, this was the beginning of both of our life long interpreting nature to others. Bob was a teacher and was always mentoring and challenging us to grow in our abilities as teachers.

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**More recollections:**

Naturalists of Bob's caliber are rare. Most people specialize in one facet of natural history. They study birds, or plants, or insects. Bob studied everything. Bob taught us to diligently observe nature. To measure and record the world around us. Get out a stopwatch and time how many calls a minute a Robin makes. Measure the size of that tree or flower. Use a thermometer and discover the difference in temperatures between the sunny and shady sides of a rock. Quantify Nature but never lose the wonder of Nature. Do not overlook the beauty of a spring woods in full bloom or the music of a wren's song. He taught us the need to put Nature into the hands of children. Share with them the wonder. Bob was happiest when he was teaching and especially

loved to teach young children. He once said, “If a child sees a bird through binoculars then they probably will not look at one through a B-B gun sight.”

Bob’s data from the 1970s provide a baseline for us to measure the health of the Tenhave woodlot. We have several decades of his bird banding records. These form the base of our bird list. As part of a 1971 National Science Foundation Summer Institute for teachers at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, he identified and measured hundreds of trees in Tenhave Woods. This quantitative analysis allows us to measure the changes in tree species composition. Under Bob’s direction, the first vascular plant list for the park was compiled.

Bob was instrumental in helping to save Tenhave Woods. In 1967, there was a incident in the park that had many in the neighborhood wanting the woods cut down. Bob was one of those that fought hard to keep it, realizing its value as a nature park. He received death threats for his activism. The compromise is what we see today. The fences went up, and the only way to get in was by going to City Hall and getting a key. The areas outside of this fence had the underbrush cut to create the sylvan park areas. In 1986, turnstiles were installed and the park was opened back up again to the public.

When picking trail names for the Royal Oak Arboretum in 2017, we decided that the trail going past the birdfeeder would be named after Gasorowski, because he was a very active bird bander.

Bob Gasorowski was a biology teacher at Kimball High School. He ran the nature programs in both Tenhave and Cummingston in the 1970’s. The Royal Oak Nature Society would not exist without Bob’s programs as an example. It is fitting that our highest honor is named the “Robert Gasorowski Lifetime Achievement Award” and that he was the first recipient. Bob spent a lifetime learning and then teaching about Nature. We will miss him.