

## UC-Berkeley Obituary for Frank A. Pitelka

**BERKELEY** – Frank Alois Pitelka, a professor emeritus of zoology at the University of California, Berkeley, who for decades studied bird and mammal behavior and ecology in the Alaskan Arctic and California, died Oct. 10 at the age of 87.

A former resident of Berkeley, Pitelka passed away at his daughter's home in Altadena, Calif., from complications of prostate cancer.



Frank Pitelka

"Pitelka was an amazing mentor to a whole generation of students coming of age in the heyday of behavioral ecology," said former student Walter Koenig, referring to a time in the 1970s when a popular area of biology was the study of mating and reproductive behavior and how it related to ecological factors in the environment. "He was able to encourage and inspire students and colleagues, many of whom are major figures in behavioral ecology around the country."

Koenig, a UC Berkeley adjunct professor of integrative biology and a behavioral ecologist who studies social behavior in acorn woodpeckers, was first encouraged by Pitelka to study bird behavior. For his work with students, Pitelka won the campus's Distinguished Teaching Award in 1984.

Pitelka also contributed greatly to UC Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. He was curator of birds in the museum from 1949 until 1963 and served for many years as associate director with primary responsibility for the Hastings Natural History Reservation in Carmel Valley, a 2000-acre ecological study site operated by the museum. Pitelka steered many students into animal behavior studies at the reservation, according to Koenig, who is a full-time research zoologist there.

"Frank was a major force within the biology community on campus and, more generally, in ornithology and ecology," said Craig Moritz, director of the museum and professor of integrative biology at UC Berkeley.

One of Pitelka's long-term projects was a 19-year study of brown lemming populations in the Arctic around Barrow, Ala., that began in 1955 and continued through 1973. He and his students concentrated on the reasons for the cyclic ups and downs in population density that he found to be a central phenomenon of tundra ecology. One hypothesis was that the lag in recovery of vegetation from lemming grazing was a major cause of the cycle.

Pitelka's interests broadened to include an intensive investigation of the behavioral ecology of Alaskan shorebirds in an attempt to explain their diverse mating and social behaviors, including the "lekking" behavior characteristic of such birds as the male buff-breasted sandpiper, which

displays in groups to females around an area called a court, or lek. He attributed many aspects of bird behavior to the availability and predictability of food resources on the tundra.

"Beginning with analyses of the lemming cycle and its importance to avian predators, then expanding to the ecology and behavior of shorebirds and other tundra (animals), Pitelka and his students have accumulated a unique body of information about this remote biota," read a citation from the American Ornithologist's Union upon presenting Pitelka with its highest honor, the Brewster Award, in 1980.

Pitelka was born in Chicago, Ill., on March 27, 1916, and attended the University of Illinois, from which he earned a B.S. summa cum laude in 1939. He immediately headed west to UC Berkeley, from which he obtained his Ph.D. in 1946. It was in graduate school that he met his wife, Dorothy Riggs Pitelka, who was also a graduate student. They married Feb. 5, 1943, five years before she completed her Ph.D.

He joined the zoology department faculty in 1947 and served as department chair from 1963 to 1966 and again from 1968 until 1971. Aside from his term as associate director of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, he was a research ecologist there from 1967 until his retirement in 1985. He was recalled after his retirement and continued his association with the museum until 1997. Pitelka received various honors during his career, including the Mercer Award in 1953 and the Eminent Ecologist Award in 1992 from the Ecological Society of America, the Brewster Medal in 1980 and the Berkeley Citation in 1986. He was an elected fellow of the Arctic Institute of North America, the American Ornithologist's Union, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the California Academy of Sciences and the Animal Behavior Society, and was an honorary member of the Cooper Ornithological Society.

In 1997, Pitelka, who was of Czech ancestry, received an honorary doctorate in biological sciences from Masaryk University in Brno, now part of the Czech Republic.

He also was a Guggenheim Fellow and a Miller Institute Research Professor. He served on the editorial boards of numerous journals, edited the journal *Ecology* from 1962 to 1964, and served for nine years (1953-62) on the editorial committee of University of California Press. He also served on numerous federal government committees and panels, including at the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission and the National Academy of Sciences. He was a member of the board of the directors of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory twice: 1976-79 and 1983-86.

A cultured man, Pitelka was an enthusiastic supporter of the arts and a great lover of opera. He also was proud of his Czech heritage, and his retirement party was held at a Berkeley restaurant that had a Czech chef, "with whom Frank was always friendly and always engaged in some light-hearted banter in Czech, which Frank remembered from his childhood," said David Wake, UC Berkeley professor of integrative biology and curator of herpetology at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology.

Wake described Pitelka as "a larger than life kind of person who was always a leader...Frank was truly a dominant force around here for 50 years, not only formally, but in all the numerous seminars he attended."

Pitelka's wife, Dorothy, a cancer researcher and adjunct professor of zoology at UC Berkeley, died of Alzheimer's disease in 1994. They are survived by sons Louis F. Pitelka, director of the University of Maryland's Appalachian Laboratory in Frostburg, and Vince Pitelka, associate professor of ceramics, Appalachian Center for Craft, Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville; daughter Kazi Pitelka, a concert violist in Altadena, Calif.; five grandchildren and two great grandchildren.