



NATURALIST'S CORNER

A HISTORY OF MONTHLY MEETINGS

When I thought about introducing John McDonald, our speaker for January 2026, it seemed appropriate to review how many previous programs he had provided for the Club since his first one 30 years ago. This inspired me to examine past newsletters, which I was able to do back through about 1976. The Club was founded in 1969, but newsletters from its first six or seven years could not be found. This history of 50 years of monthly meetings includes about 400 total programs. Arranging them by speaker was rather straightforward; sorting by topic (e.g., general natural history, botany, programs with a geographic focus) was not as simple.

It is not surprising that Club members who have served for years as officers and/or directors head the list for the number of programs given. Among those currently serving, Sonya Vickers leads with 14, followed closely by Nancy and/or Tom Condon with 13 and then Dave Lovejoy with 11. However, these totals are greatly exceeded by past board members Richard Sanderson (20) and Jack Megas (19). Other local naturalists not associated with Club as board members have also presented many programs. Heading this list is Tom Tynning with 12; it is also noteworthy that Tom and Richard share a “longevity” record, each having given programs from 1977-1978 through the present. Other non-Club members with five or more programs include Tom Ricardi (8), Richard Little (6), and John McDonald (5).

As mentioned above, classifying programs by topic is not precise. About 40 programs have focused on conservation/endangered species/environmental problems, about 30 on local or regional natural history, and another 30 on botany. Nature photography has been the subject about 20 times, with presentations by Les Campbell, John Green, Jack Swedberg, and most recently Kevin Kopchynski (4 times). Programs featuring particular animal groups have most often discussed mammals (both local and from other regions). We have learned about gorillas, whales, and elephants and local wildlife such as coyotes (3), beaver (2), cougar (2), and cottontails (2). Black bears have been featured five times with presentations by Jim Cardoza (twice), Wendell Dodge, Mark Sayre, and John McDonald, each of whom has been the bear biologist for Mass Wildlife at various times. Birds, amphibians, reptiles, and insects and other arthropods have each been discussed about 15 times.

Regarding aquatic biology, if we combine freshwater and marine, we have seen about 30 programs, including such topics as salmon restoration, wild and scenic rivers of Massachusetts, and underwater marine life along the North Shore. Over the years, we have had many programs centered on a particular region, covering such sites as the Antarctic, Alaska, Nepal, Isle au Haute, Costa Rica, and the American Southwest. Nearly 30 programs have featured astronomy, with most presented by Richard Sanderson and Jack Megas; occasionally Dave Gallup and Jack collaborated on a single program, as did Richard and Jack a few times. Occasionally, there have been programs in a category by themselves. Programs featuring nature poetry, viewing nature through Tiffany stained glass, and the Condons’ cross-country canoe trip are examples of this.

Reviewing 50 years of newsletters has also yielded the following observations. In 1977, the Club initiated a plan to hold a “Dinner and Awards night” in lieu of the October regular meeting. These evenings took place at a local restaurant (at Storowton in West Springfield for many years) and the event came to be called the “Environmentalist of the Year” dinner. Those honored during the first decade or so included John Brainerd, Tom Tynning, Bill Tomkins, Ed Piela, Bill Doty, Helen Bates, Robie Hubley, and Les Campbell. Later, the dinner meetings occurred every two or three years and honorees have included Jack Megas, Tom Ricardi, Dave Gallup, and Tom & Nancy Condon, who were recognized in 2012, the year of our last such meeting.

Occasionally at Board meetings, we discuss whether the October dinner meeting should be revived, but consensus seems to be that the total number of members is currently insufficient to support it. Membership history shows an increase during the Club’s first decade to about 300 in 1979 to an all-time high of “nearly 600” in 1982, largely a result of the very successful “Whale of a Day” program in 1979 and the Club’s campaign opposing logging on Mt Tom. However, a steep decline occurred later in the

2026 APRIL to JUNE

1980s, causing newsletter editor Richard Sanderson to warn in a March 1986 editorial that the Club might disband by the end of the year if members did not volunteer for leadership positions. The May election that year left the position of President vacant, and by 1988 membership was only 35. But recovery occurred and the Club has clearly survived. Membership totals hovered around 200 in the 1990s until 2010, when a slow decline began, continuing through to the present.

It is probably extremely unlikely that anyone reading this has an association with the Club as far back as its earliest years and even less likely that they may have newsletters from those days. However, if anyone does, please contact me. We have an almost complete set back through mid 1976 (half of 1987 is missing) and would like to be able to add to this archive if possible.

~Dave Lovejoy