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In memory of Dr. Norman O. Dronen, Jr. (9 October 1945–9 December 2022): Associate Editor for Parasitic Platyhelminthes (*Zootaxa*)

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Dr. Norman O. Dronen, Jr. (9 October 1945–9 December 2022)

Norman (Norm) Obert Dronen (or “Dr. D.”), Associate Editor for the Parasitic Platyhelminthes section of *Zootaxa* for the last twenty years, passed away on 9 December 2022. He was born on 9 October 1945, in Shelton, Washington, to Norman and Roberta Dronen. He grew up on the Olympic Peninsula and spent countless hours outdoors in nature among the scenic and lush, green-forested countryside outside of Olympia, Washington, and the Olympic National Forest and Park. Norm, known as “Butch,” and his older brother, Vern, known as “Buck,” were a dynamic pair doing everything together in their younger years. They had a particular fondness for hunting which Norm carried with him for the rest of his life spending many hours with his family out at the deer lease(s) which they enjoyed over the years (Fig. 1). While a student at Irene S. Reed High School, Norm met his soon-to-be-wife, Nancy Brooks, who was his date for senior prom in 1964, and they soon married (on 28 October 1967), staying very happily married for over 55 years until Norm’s passing (Fig. 2). After graduating high school (Fig. 3) and over the next decade, Norm earned his A.S. from Olympic College in Bremerton in 1966 and his B.A. in Biology from Eastern Washington University (EWU) in Cheney in 1968; it was also at this time that they both had their first child, Phil. Their second child, Doug, was born by the time Norm had earned his M.S. in Biology at EWU in 1970, wherein he described with Dr. Bruce Z. Lang, *Cephalogonimus salamandrus* Dronen & Lang, 1974 and its life cycle (see Dronen & Lang 1974). They say that “the third time is the charm,” and sure enough, Roberta, their third and final child (Fig. 4), arrived right on cue upon the completion of Norm’s Ph.D. in Zoology (Ecology & Parasitology) in 1974 from New Mexico State University (NMSU) in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Under co-chairs, Dr. Walter G. Whitford and Dr. James R. Zimmerman, his dissertation entitled “Ecological studies of two helminths, *Haematoloechus* spp. (Trematoda: Plagiorchiiidae) in southern New Mexico,” closed the chapter on his formal education and began a new chapter—his journey to becoming a tenured professor (see Dronen 1975, 1977, 1978). While in college and graduate school, he worked as a commercial fisheries biologist for the Washington State Fisheries, a graduate teaching and research assistant, studied the common or sheep liver fluke, *Fasciola hepatica* Linnaeus, 1781, at EWU, and served as a coordinator for Desert Summer Biome Arthropod Research at NMSU.

In 1974 and fresh out of graduate school, Norm was hired in the Department of Biology at Texas A&M University-College Station, Texas (TAMU), as a Visiting Assistant Professor. Two years later, he became Assistant Professor upon replacing fellow parasitologist, Dr. Sewell Hopkins, in the Department of Biology. During this time, he developed graduate courses in parasitology, protozoology and biological illustration and was appointed head of the peer review panel to evaluate faculty teaching. By 1979–1984, his excellence in teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels earned him a promotion to Associate Professor as well as Director of Undergraduate Programs, Chairman of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, and member of the Graduate Studies Committee in Biology at TAMU. A few years later (1988), Norm was selected among the 100 most outstanding alumni from NMSU during the university’s first 100 years. He also moved from the Biological Sciences Buildings, across the bicycle racks on campus, and over to Nagle Hall and the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences (WFSC) at TAMU. He was promoted to Full Professor in WFSC in 1997 and by then had expanded his international collaborations to include colleagues in China, Egypt, England and elsewhere. He became curator of the Vertebrate Parasite Collection at the Biological Research and Teaching Collections (BRTC, formerly known as the Texas Cooperative Wildlife Collection) and in 2002 accepted the position of Associate Editor for *Zootaxa* (Parasitic Platyhelminthes). In 2019 through early 2020 he transferred “over the train tracks” to the West Campus and into the John Kimbrough Building and the newly created Department of Ecology and Conservation Biology at TAMU. He “officially” retired shortly afterwards (late July 2020) having spent almost 50 years at TAMU, but he still remained busy. As Emeritus Professor, he continued collaborations with colleagues in Egypt, India, Iraq and elsewhere, and he actively maintained his own research at the BRTC and the Schubot Exotic Bird Center, School of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences in AggieLand. In the fall of 2021, Norm began to experience abdominal pain and discomfort that progressively grew worse. After spending numerous months traveling to physicians, enduring countless tests and procedures, including debilitating chemotherapy—all the while continuing his parasitological work with the help of his daughter Roberta—Norm passed away a little over a year later on 9 December 2022 (sadly, this author’s birthday) having been diagnosed with Stage 4 pancreatic cancer that had metastasized to his liver. He is survived by his wife, 3 children, and 6 grandchildren: Ashley, Brittney, Bethany, Hollie, Klayton and Justin.

Norm authored over 130 papers, 2 book reviews, 2 technical reports, and with his students and colleagues presented over 80 papers at various symposia in the U.S.A. and overseas. Norm immensely enjoyed publishing in *Zootaxa*, more so than other journals, and when needed, reviewed papers for this journal, too. With relatively little funding, Norm’s ingenuity and resourcefulness allowed him and his students to explore a surprisingly wide range

of interests on a “shoestring budget.” His interests were broad with a wide range of research in his lab highlighting the parasite ecology and systematics of all classes of vertebrate and invertebrate hosts and groups (Fig. 5). If you had visited his lab over the last half century, you would have been witness to experiments examining the population dynamics of hosts and their parasites, the utilization of trophic structures by helminth parasites, numerous projects examining parasite biodiversity, systematics, comparative morphology, experimental life cycle determinations and descriptions along with epidemiology and genetics. Even endangered, threatened and uncommon hosts were not out of reach as his lab hosted a number of parasite studies examining these unique hosts. Norm was particularly proud of his working parasite research collection (now housed in the BRTC) which he built up over five decades and which served as a basis for exchange and cooperation with other museum-based parasite collections (e.g., H. W. Manter Laboratory at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; The Natural History Museum in England; and the USNPC and Smithsonian Natural History Museum in Beltsville, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., respectively). Given all this, it comes as no surprise over his career that the number of opportunities he was able to offer students to allow them to use multidisciplinary approaches in investigating and answering critical questions within a variety of parasite systems was extraordinary in number.

While Norm personally and academically advised and graduated over twenty M.S. and Ph.D. students, the first priority for him as a professor was the students. Please note that I didn’t write “*his* students,” but “*the* students.” This included students in his own department at TAMU and those in other departments, students currently enrolled at TAMU or transferring into it from Blinn Community College in town, or students still in public school. On the one hand, as undergraduate academic advisor in WFSC, he supported and mentored students from all backgrounds, with varied interests, and in either good or dire academic standing. He exhibited a true caring and concern for students and did not find their continuous questions and need for help a burden (Fig. 6). On the other hand, as an active scientist, he kept his door open to *all* students who wanted to learn, were curious about parasites, unsure of a career, or had become “floaters” in the department upon falling out with their major professor and/or failing to narrow down a graduate research project. Indeed, the number of students he helped, both with his time and resources—even those not officially listed in the TAMU Registrar as enrolled “in his lab”—was impressive. At the end of his career, he had helped more students earn department recognition for their own faculty committee chairs than for his own credit. This comes as no surprise to his students and others who knew him and his demeanor (Fig. 7). He was a soft-spoken, gentle and generous man, who quietly kept his head down, who shunned attention and praise, who neither cared for power nor desired basking in the spotlight, and who cared more for others than himself—often to his detriment politically. “I’d rather be able to put my head down on the pillow and sleep at night, than live with the knowledge that I screwed someone over for a promotion,” he would tell me. With the ever-growing competitive and never-ending cut-throat ethos within the halls of academia today, you could say, sadly, that Norm’s exceptional attitude has become noticeably rarer and more outdated—dare I say, even extinct!

For me and other students and colleagues who worked with him, Norm was a fine parasitologist, a caring mentor and a dear friend. Here are some comments from some who had the pleasure to know and work with him:

Dr. Yasser F.M. Karar; Department of Zoology, Faculty of Sciences, New Valley University, Kharga, New Valley, Egypt, and former Ph.D. student who worked with Norm Dronen: “In fact, I cannot find words and expressions that express my sincere thanks and gratitude for this prominent scientist in parasitology, my spiritual father in parasitology, Prof. Dr. [Norman] Dronen. I did not have the opportunity to talk to him face-to-face, just communications through e-mails over the course of six years. During this period, we carried out much valuable, high-quality research, which, through his guidance and with the help and great effort of my respected professor, Dr. Charles Blend, I learned a lot about scientific publishing [and] literature. He was always positive in his comments, even in his criticisms, sympathetic and kind in his responses, always generous in his information, very keen on my development, always pushing me forward, and even gave me a lot of advice and experiences to use, whether in my personal or professional life. In fact, the credit for several skills and experiences I gained are primarily due to him. One of the things that impressed me most about him is that he [was] a strong fighter who [did] not give up; despite his illness, he was following up on developments in the work and encouraged the completion of the work in the best way possible until his last days. In fact, no matter how much I [say or] try to talk about him, I will not [be complete], but our consolation is that he left a mark and his imprint, which will be transmitted by many, and I seek to be one of those.”



FIGURES 1–4. In memoriam to Dr. Norm O. Dronen, Jr. **1.** Norm or “Butch” with one of the many prize bucks he got in life. **2.** Norm and his wife, Nancy, together on a leisurely ship cruise. **3.** Norm awarded his high school diploma from Irene S. Reed High School in Washington (approx. 1964). **4.** Norm and Nancy’s three children; left to right: Phil Dronen (oldest), Roberta Sheffield (youngest), and Doug Dronen (middle) (approx. mid-1990s).



FIGURES 5–8. In memoriam to Dr. Norm O. Dronen, Jr. **5.** Catching a big fish (and one loaded with parasites) with his older brother Vern (in background) off Alaska on one of his many field excursions. **6.** Being rewarded for his quality teaching by having the TAMU Freshman Fish Camp and the giant celebratory cookie named “Camp Dronen” in his honor (Summer, 1995). **7.** Norm surrounded by appreciative students and camp counselors at the TAMU Freshman Fish Camp named “Camp Dronen” in his honor (Summer, 1995). **8.** Norm with his daughter, Roberta, at her wedding to Chris Sheffield in College Station, Texas (18 July 1998).



FIGURES 9–12. In memoriam to Dr. Norm O. Dronen, Jr. **9.** Norm and Nancy dancing together in the backyard of their home in College Station, Texas. **10.** Norm and the author celebrating upon the latter earning his M.S. in WFSC from TAMU (December 1996) in front of one of their big and spectacularly decorated Christmas trees. **11.** Norm's best friend, Dr. Merrill Sweet, Emeritus Professor, Department of Biology, TAMU, and the author upon the latter earning his M.S. in WFSC from TAMU (December 1996). **12.** Norm in cultural attire and enjoying some light-hearted time with colleagues in Egypt (approx. 2000).

Dr. Charlayna Cammarata, former and last Ph.D. student of Norm Dronen, TAMU: “I actually met Dr. Dronen when I was considering leaving graduate school altogether. My first lab was extremely toxic, and my research interests were not aligned with those of my former PI. By the time I realized I wanted to leave my first lab, applications for other grad programs were closed and I was left with two options: leave grad school or find a new lab within the Texas A&M University system. So, I emailed Dr. Dronen with barely any hope and no clear plan to see if I could find a better environment—some sort of light at the end of the tunnel of what had been a rough first year of grad school. A few days later we met in his lab to discuss my research interests, and although I had little training in parasitology and he had little experience with turtle blood flukes, he agreed to take me on as his final Ph.D. student of his career. And I was indeed his last student—he passed a week before my graduation, approximately ten months after he told me he had cancer. He was an incredibly knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and caring advisor who was willing to help any time I asked for his assistance. He always wanted his students to work on things that we were excited about regardless of his expertise, which allowed us to create projects we were passionate about throughout our entire graduate careers. And man, could he draw! I will aspire to illustrate parasites as well as he did for the rest of my life. I had the great pleasure of working with such a well-respected parasitologist and genuinely wonderful human being for my Ph.D. I am forever thankful he gave me the chance to succeed in his lab.”

Dr. Sandeep K. Malhotra, Former Head of the Department of Zoology, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, U.P., India: “I write this with the fond hope to be a contributor to keep the candle lit and burning in memory of my dear friend, Dr. Norman Dronen, who dedicated his life to the service of Parasitology. My acquaintance with Dr Dronen has been for a very brief period of time when we worked on the worms of marine ecosystems [in the] Arabian Sea. The point of interest was the trematode [genus] *Neolebouria* that parasitized perciform fishes in [the] deep oceans [of] India. It was his acumen to work incessantly in a remarkable fashion that two manuscripts could emerge from the material we collected from [the] Arabian Sea at the central and western coasts of India. Norm was a friend of friends, and he took along scientist friends from as many as three countries to utilize their expertise in helminthology [and] to give final shape to these manuscripts. Day to day emailing was the order of the day when all 4–5 of us from different countries put in our views on different aspects in an effort to refine the manuscripts by the time these were published; one in *Systematic Parasitology* and the other in *Zootaxa* in 2014. But the silver lining was that in spite of several exchanges in writing, we never had an idea of how serious was the ailment with which the man, immensely rich in science, suffered. In fact, I only became aware of his ailment on the day when I read [his] obituary on [a] joint international group [email], a month ago. Hats off to the dedication of a man of this humble nature, who worked always with high spirits. As ill luck would have it, I never heard from him on my next manuscript on a checklist of nematodes from anurans sent to him last year [during his illness], but Dr. Scott [Monks, Associate Editor at *Zootaxa* for the Acanthocephala] informed [me] of the safe custody of my manuscript with him [and] has continued to assist in its reviewing after the sad demise of my friend, Norm. I bow down before his memories that will keep the flame of friendship burning in our hearts for a long time to come.”

Along with his students and colleagues, I have had the pleasure of being a member of his family for over 30 years. Norm always considered family to be the most important thing in life; as a matter of fact, his family best defined him and not his profession. Here are a few memories of Norm from them:

Nancy Dronen, wife: “Surprisingly, Norm had great taste in women’s fashion. Roberta [our daughter] wanted two designer dresses [for her wedding]. [After she] tried them on, he actually contacted the designer directly and she designed her wedding dress with bow, cathedral-length train and Battenburg lace. ‘Nothing but the best for my girl,’ Norm said.” (Fig. 8).

Doug Dronen, second son: “Norm kept the cleanest lab you would ever see in your life. He received compliments and won an award from the Office of Environmental Safety & Health at TAMU. Whenever he had an experiment set up, everything around it was spotless. He had an incredible lab at his office in the Dept. of Ecology & Conservation Biology. He always got stuff done right away. [Author’s note: If you knew Norm, you knew that his work ethic was alacrity and no procrastination. The best time to work on something was in the here and now.] One time in the 1980s, we were all driving to a meeting in Oklahoma [Author’s note: This was the annual meeting of the Southwestern Association of Parasitologists (SWAP) held at the University of Oklahoma Biological Station (UOBS) along the shore of Lake Texoma, Oklahoma] and we had a grad student, Harold Underwood, with us. We stopped at a rest stop and got infested with ticks! Then when we got to our room at the field station, it got ticks and daddy-long leg spiders! He always liked to have family get-togethers where they would cook something every Sunday. We would barbeque/cook something and that was our family together time among our busy schedules. His top priority was his family and friends. Getting together with them was so important to him.”

Roberta Sheffield, daughter: “When I went with Norm to sit in the trees [at the deer lease(s) before we had a deer stand], I would drop raisin snacks to the ground, and he would climb all the way down, get them, and bring them back up the tree. ‘He did it about a hundred times! I was probably five [years old].’ He wanted to make sure his kids stayed out of trouble, drugs, booze, etc., so he would take us fishing, bought a ski boat, took us hunting—we were always away from home on weekends along with our friends. He bought the trailer so we could all go camping. He would take all of us with him to school along with the grandkids. Klayton would dress up in a tie, like his ‘Paw Paw’ and go to work with Norm up until Klayton was in 8th grade. Klayton would dress like ‘Paw Paw.’ [Author’s Note: Norm was known to his kids and grandkids as “Paw Paw.”] When my [own] kids or me were ill, Norm would make a bed on the floor of his office, so his children could stay with him. In 1995, I had to have kidney treatments twice a day for weeks, and Norm would accompany me to those treatments since Nancy was working. He impressed upon Klayton and Justin the importance of a good education. Justin was bullied in school and Norm offered to home-school him! I had a deer stand next to Norm’s [on our deer lease]. Norm would always escort me to my deer stand first, make sure I was all set, and then go to his deer stand. ‘He was a good daddy.’” Along with family, Roberta also commented on her father’s work. “He would allow us to help him prepare his microscope slides. And then he’d take us across the tracks to West Campus to the [Texas] A&M creamery to get ice cream and watch them make it. All three of us kids got his work ethic from him. That work ethic being: ‘Always try and do your best, and always go above and beyond. If you are not going to do it right, then don’t do it.’ He also never took credit. He wanted his students to receive the credit they worked for; he never took it away from them. He made us appreciate our environment. We were never allowed to litter. We recycled. He taught us about the importance of nature and keeping it alive.”

Klayton Sheffield, grandson: “He really enjoyed the Sunday dinners. The first time I shot a deer with ‘Paw Paw’, I was seven years old! He taught me how to dress a deer. He bought me a 9 mm pistol the last Christmas [2021] and purchased me a drone for Christmas in 2022. When I graduated high school, he got me a Blackstone griddle and a barbeque pit with tools because he knew how much I loved to cook/barbeque. I [also] used to go to work with him in the summer.” [Author’s note: Klayton ended up spending more time in the lab than Norm’s own kids!]

Dr. Charles (Chuck) Blend, former M.S. student and Post-Doctoral Associate under Norm Dronen, TAMU: I have so many wonderful thoughts and memories of Norm and our many years working together. Throughout it all, I never stopped being awed by his gift for drawing. I considered Norm not “just” a scientist but an artist. Throughout his career, he developed a very distinctive style of biological illustration—often attempted by others, including myself, but never duplicated. Early on, I nicknamed him “The Stipple King.” His illustrations were not only accurate and taxonomically informative, but they were a wonder to look at, never overly detailed, and they had depth and texture, too—a beautiful appearance! As a former student, I was particularly moved by the fact that Norm made sure every one of his students, whether they were visiting him from overseas and/or were “stuck” on campus, felt welcome over the holidays. While I was working on my M.S., I didn’t have a car, so it was difficult to travel home some years during the winter break between semesters. Norm invited me over to his house, and he would fix me and his family meals, even letting me stay over at his home if we imbibed a bit too much on “Santa’s Secret Sauce.” Every year they had the biggest and most spectacularly decorated Christmas tree. His wife, Nancy, went all out decorating their house for every holiday, and I always loved how much Norm adored Nancy—a wonderful role model for my marriage! (Fig. 9) Oh, I must tell you about the wonderfully fun and amusing times we had at Dudley’s Draw there at Northgate across from the TAMU campus. Dudley’s was, and still is, along with the Dixie Chicken, “the” watering holes for students, faculty and visitors alike to Aggieland. The joy-filled, belly-splitting hours in laughter we had with Norm’s best friend, Dr. Merrill Sweet, Emeritus Professor, Department of Biology, TAMU, will forever bring a smile to my face. Merrill had the long, full-bearded appearance of Gandalf from “The Lord of the Rings,” the poetic wisdom of John Muir, and the mischievous and playful heart, especially for the ladies, of Cupid. After six, seven or eight hours straight working on a paper in the lab together, Norm and I would celebrate a hard day’s work by walking from Nagle Hall over to Dudley’s, only to meet up with our fellow “partner in crime,” Merrill. It was magic! Our Fountain of Youth! We would get a pitcher of Coors Light Beer ... or two ... or three ... and our aching bodies and minds would be renewed. That was our “Parasitological Elixir of Life!” Even after we moved to the Ozona Restaurant for Wednesday afternoon beers, all remained right in the world. I will always cherish those wonderful memories at Dudley’s and Ozona with Norm and Merrill.

Professionally, the single most outstanding pedagogical gift Norm had was that he could help you learn in a way where you “saved face.” If you said something that was not correct, and that happened a lot, he would never

call you out on it. He neither directly criticized nor “pounced” on you in a condescending manner. But over the next 10–15 minutes, he would slowly bring you around to the correct idea, so that in your mind you would realize, “Uh oh, what I said a little while ago was not correct. Now I understand.” Thus, you learned in a way that was neither embarrassing for you nor left you with a feeling that you just disappointed your advisor. It was an extraordinary gift, which he had because he was such a great listener. He truly listened and learned from *all* his students; never talking down, never raising his voice, and never ignoring students’ comments and questions. That’s the true definition of an outstanding teacher and caring mentor (Figs. 10 & 11).

On a more personal note, I consider my life so much richer and more blessed because I had the fortune to meet, learn from, and spend the last 30+ years of my life working with Norm. He was my mentor, “academic dad,” and best friend. He made scientific discovery thrilling and learning exciting. For everyone reading this memoriam and who had the opportunity of knowing him, he would not hesitate to say that the best way for each of us to honor his memory would be to continue to excel in your chosen profession(s). The field of parasitology is diminished with his passing, but I am sure right now he is enjoying *many* more “mug-fulls” of his favorite frosty beverage, Coors Light Beer, up at his beloved deer lease On High. Here’s to you, buddy (tapping mugs together) (Fig. 12)!

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