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Zoology in the Middle East



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Middle Eastern herpetology loses John Gasperetti, 1920-2001

The Middle East lost a key figure in the study of its herpetofauna when John Gasperetti passed away. John was born on 24 October 1920 in Colorado, USA, the oldest of three sons of Julius, an immigrant from north-eastern Italy, and Alicia, whose parents had immigrated from the same area, Gasperetti. He grew up in a loving home of limited means and in 1938 graduated from Huerfano County High School, Walsenburg, Colorado. During the notorious economic Depression, young John worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps (the »Tree Army«), where he learned the basics of surveying. After that he went to work for various construction and engineering companies. Then, on 7 December 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor precipitated America's entry into World War 2. John, to his utter disappointment, was rejected by the US Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines because of a bad eye. However, the War Manpower Commission sent him to Saudi Arabia to work for Aramco in the oil-fields. This gave his life a new direction as here he developed his lifelong interest in the wildlife of Arabia, with an emphasis on reptiles.

In 1948 John returned briefly to America, whence he went to Afghanistan to work on the Boghra Canal for nearly a year. After another visit home, August 1951 found him working for Kuwait Oil Co., after which he started working for J. Paul Getty, Getty Oil Co., in the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia Neutral Zone. He travelled widely in the Middle East with Mr. Getty – a man he always admired. In 1955 he travelled to Iraq to work on various projects, and then had a period in Cartagena, Spain, on a US Navy project. He returned to Iraq but had to leave when the revolution broke out. He had to spend more than a year at his parents' home in Wyoming, recovering from a leg fracture that left him with a limp and a steel pin in his leg. In November 1960 he went again to Afghanistan, but in January 1961 his work was interrupted and he returned to the Middle East to be Mr Getty's special representative at a conference to determine the boundaries of the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia Neutral Zone. Thereafter he completed his assignment in Afghanistan.

John returned to Saudi Arabia in November 1961, to work, in succession, for the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources and for various contracting and engineering companies on projects all over the Kingdom. Apart from one year in Kuwait and a brief spell in Lebanon, he remained in Saudi Arabia until 1997. In 1973 his life again changed for the better, when he married Patricia (Patsy) Bird, a nurse by training, who had been visiting Arabia and who became his partner also in herpetology. In 1986, John gave up surveying and engineering and went to work for the Meteorology and Environmental Protection Administration, Ministry of Defence and Aviation, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Always and everywhere John pursued his interest in wildlife, collected and documented specimens for various institutions in the USA and Europe, and took thousands of photographs. From 1967 on, he published some twenty papers on reptiles and other wildlife.



John Gasperetti, 1920–2001, in 1996

In 1979 the periodical *Fauna of Saudi Arabia*, an Arabian-European enterprise, began to appear. In its 18 volumes (8,233 pages, excluding the portions in Arabic) the amphibians and reptiles occupy over 10%, with 880 pages. Of these, 646 pages were authored or coauthored by John Gasperetti. The jewel in the crown is his 1988 monograph on the snakes (282 pp.), even if some taxonomic conclusions stimulated arguments (Werner & Werner 1990). Gasperetti's other papers within this framework are Hillenius and Gasperetti (1984), Balletto et al. (1985), Gasperetti et al. (1993) and Schaetti and Gasperetti (1994), which was his last completed and published paper. Some others remain incomplete, unpublished, including a major one on the lizards of Arabia. John was aware of the monumental nature of his contribution, which vastly advanced our knowledge of Arabia's herpetology, but he was not vain. When in 1986 I made his acquaintance at the Mecca of Middle East herpetology, the British Museum (Natural History), I told him that we were about to promote *Cerastes cerastes gasperettii* Leviton and Anderson, 1967, to species rank (Werner et al. 1991). John: "Oh, and I was just going to demote it to synonymy."

In 1996 John suffered a stroke, which left him disabled but failed to subdue his enthusiasm for the region's wildlife. In December 1996 he and his wife came to Egypt to work for three months on the marine turtles of the Egyptian Red Sea. However, in 1997 John's illness enforced retirement and he and Patsy settled in Egypt. John never returned to the USA; he remained a proud American with his heart in the Middle East. On 10 December 2001, in Cairo, John Gasperetti died peacefully in his sleep and, surrounded by friends, was laid to rest in the American Cemetery in Old Cairo.

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