

## VOLUME 17, NO. 1 Spring 1999

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In Tribute: Kenneth Olson  
Tuttle, Merlin

Kenneth Olson, a highly awarded inventor and photographer, and founding member of BCI, died in an auto accident at the age of 80, on December 14, 1998, near his St. Paul, Minnesota, home. As an instrumentation specialist at 3M, he held several patents and had won the company's prestigious Engineering Achievement Award for his creative development of a wide variety of products.

I had the good fortune of meeting Ken in 1982 when he called to inquire how I had photographed frog-eating bats for an article in National Geographic. Describing my difficulties with the limitations of then-available photographic equipment, I told Ken that National Geographic Society engineers had assured me it was impossible to develop the kind of high-speed, lightweight system I needed. That was all the challenge Ken needed. Within weeks, he surprised me with a system that surpassed anything I had even dreamed of owning. Two years later, he asked if he could check it for me prior to a trip I was taking to Australia. When the system returned, it was ostensibly the same equipment, but it had miraculously doubled in power. Because all who saw my flashes wanted their own, Ken spent a great deal of the last 15 years supplying them to wildlife photographers around the world, including those at the National Geographic Society.

To my eternal gratitude, Ken and his wife Meta early devoted themselves to assisting in my bat conservation efforts. Although he had invented devices so sophisticated and unique he could virtually have named his price, Ken always had a soft spot in his heart for anyone helping to conserve the natural world he loved. In my case, he never charged a penny for any of his inventions. He graciously handled desperate international calls at all hours of day and night and air-freighted new units to replace those I managed to destroy. Each time I found a way to inadvertently blow one up, Ken simply went to work on improvements that, as he said, would be "more Ph.D.-proof."

Photography has played a key role in helping humans around the world to understand and appreciate bats, and few have contributed more to that success than Ken Olson. His wife of 43 years, Meta, fell in love with BCI's first mascot, Zuri, a winsome straw-colored flying fox, and she enthusiastically shared her husband's generosity toward bats through the time of her death three years ago. Ken is survived by his sister, Bernice Olson, a valued BCI member who shares our fond memories of Ken's loyal friendship and his unique contributions to bats and preservation of the natural world.

--Merlin Tuttle

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Olson at age 80, last August, at Glacier National Park in Montana, where he vacationed for 45 years.



Olson in 1940 at age 22, using his cousin as a model in his first attempt at portrait photography.

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