

Robin passed away in Edmonton, on 17 June 2016, after a battle with cancer. He remained upbeat to the very end, treating “every day on this side of the grass” as a good day. He was an independent spirit who lived life on his own terms, and it was a life full of adventure. He was irrepressibly enthusiastic about everything he did, and generous with his time and expertise. He was a consummate teacher, who donated his time and wisdom to school children and naturalists’ groups throughout the course of his life, and always found time to mentor others. Thanks to visits by “The Spiderman” to local schools, thousands of children have grown up in the Edmonton area with an enriched view of nature. In later years, he was a stalwart on the entomological list-serve AlbertaBugs. He felt that every query deserved a reply, and he would inevitably reply to identification requests, even if it was simply an educated guess. One AlbertaBugs reader reminisced on his passing: “Every spider that crosses my path is now viewed with curiosity and wonder rather than suspicion. I have Robin to thank for that.” He will be sorely missed by the online arachnological community, and the local naturalist community. Robin is survived by his wife Lorie Taylor Leech, as well as two children from a previous marriage, and three grandchildren.



**Robin Ernest Leech
(1937 - 2016)**

Early Days

Robin was born on 1 February 1937, in Berkeley, California, to Hugh and Frances (Quail) Leech. His father was a water beetle specialist, who was doing an MSc in Berkeley at the time. His mother had a BA in English and Economics. Early in the summer of 1937, the family moved to Vernon, British Columbia, where his father took up a job with the Canadian Forest Service. Robin’s early days were steeped in Entomology, learning how to identify insect groups as a very young boy on his father’s knee, and becoming a lifelong insect and spider collector at an early age.

In 1947 the family moved to the San Francisco Bay area of California, where Robin’s father started a new job at the California Academy of Sciences. Robin was an athletic student at high school, where he was on the swimming, track, and cross-country running teams. Throughout high school, he had a part-time job at a meat market in his home town of Mill Valley.

University Years

Robin left California in the fall of 1955 to attend the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. He had early plans to become a surgeon, but “disastrous results in first-year chemistry kinda put the end to that”. For the summer of 1956, Robin landed a job as an assistant to Ed Cashman on the Northern Insect Survey, a program of the Canadian government to do a biological inventory of the vast Arctic. They were stationed that summer at Aklavik (Northwest Territories) and near the Firth River delta (Yukon).

The following year, Robin was invited on a 14-month expedition to Africa with Dr Edward S. Ross of the California Academy of Sciences. After classes ended at UBC in the spring of 1957, Robin travelled to California for 2 months of preparations and packing. He and Ross, and Ross' botanist wife Wilda Ross, set off with a customized 1.5 ton GM truck camper, and vast quantities of collecting and photographic gear, sponsored in part by National Geographic. They drove across the southern USA, and then set off by boat from New Orleans to Africa. When they arrived, Robin quickly found his specific entomological calling - within an hour or so of getting inland, they encountered spiny-bodied gasteracanthine spiders, and Robin was hooked for life on arachnids. Many adventures ensued, including meeting the Leakey family of anthropologists, seeing the *Coelocanth* holotype specimen, and encountering ancient *Welwitschia* plants. They logged about 25,000 miles and visited almost every African country south of the Equator. Over the course of the expedition, they collected over 250,000 insects and arachnids and some 400 reptiles and amphibians. Apparently it was the largest single collection of specimens for scientific study collected in Africa on one expedition up to that time. They also took over 20,000 feet of 16 mm Kodachrome movie film, and many thousands of 35 mm Kodachrome slides, which became the basis of a popular article in National Geographic (Ross 1961).

Robin returned to Canada in time for his next year of studies at UBC in the fall of 1958.

For the summer of 1959, Robin spent a month working for Agriculture Canada (now AAFC) at the Peachland research station, followed by 3 months with the Northern Insect Survey, this time stationed with Ted MacDougall at Summit Lake, on the Alaska Highway in northeastern British Columbia. Instead of returning to school again in the fall, Robin was invited by J. Linsley Gressitt of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, to join a 2-year expedition to the southern Pacific and Antarctica. The project was funded by the United States Antarctic Research Program (USARP), and Robin's work involved studying aerial-borne arthropods to help determine where exotic pests of Hawaii were coming from (for an account of the Antarctic trips, see the National Geographic story by McDonald 1962). Robin spent two summers chasing airborne insects in Antarctica. His partner for the first year was American weevil specialist Charlie O'Brien; for the second year it was Robin's younger brother Tom. The winter in between, he took a 4-month assignment from the USA government to study vectors of bubonic plague in Vietnam and Laos.

Robin returned to Canada in 1961 for another year at UBC, followed by a third summer on the Northern Insect Survey, this time collecting up and down the Alaska Highway. Robin completed his BSc in April 1963, with perhaps the most colourful and adventurous "eight year undergrad degree" on record.

In May 1963, Robin set off on another adventure, this time to Lake Hazen on the northern end of Ellesmere Island. He spent two summers there collecting spiders for his MSc thesis project at the University of Alberta, under Dr George E. Ball, entitled "The spiders (Araneida) of the Hazen Camp area, Ellesmere Island, Northwest Territories [now Nunavut], Canada (81°49'N, 71°18'W)". He graduated in 1965, and published his results the following year (Leech 1966). During this time in Edmonton, Robin met and married Alice Payne. They had two children together; Katherine (born in 1967) and Stuart (born in 1969).

Robin and Alice spent the following year in Ottawa, where Robin worked in the spider section of the Canadian National Collection. They returned to Edmonton in 1966, where Robin began his PhD studies, again under the supervision of Dr George Ball. He defended his thesis, entitled "Revision of the amaurobiid spiders of the Nearctic region (Arachnida: Araneida)", in December 1970. The Leech family then moved hurriedly back to Ottawa so that Robin could sign some papers before midnight on 31 December, to begin a National Research Council of Canada post-doctoral fellowship at the CNC.

Working Life

When the NRCC fellowship ended in 1972, Robin took on a number of positions in various capacities. These included a 2-year stint dealing with bison diseases for Parks Canada in Ottawa (1972-74), and 4 years with the Research Secretariat of Alberta Environment, in Edmonton (1974-78).

During the time that Robin worked at Alberta Environment, he and several co-workers set up a group that would become the Alberta Society of Professional Biologists (ASPB), with Robin as the first secretary. The group eventually became accredited by the Alberta government, to grant professional status to biologists. Robin remained involved in various capacities with the ASPB for the rest of his life.

From 1978 to 1984, Robin worked as a private consultant for the federal and Alberta governments, on various environmental matters. He also did photographic work with an Edmonton-area film maker, Albert Karvonen, making films and educational materials about the flora and fauna of Alberta. Robin and Alice divorced in 1979, and he married Maja Laird in 1980. In the latter part of this period, after the photographic work dried up, Robin supplemented his consulting income by driving a taxi cab.

In 1984, Robin began contract teaching in the Biological Sciences program at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) in Edmonton. He became a full-time teacher in 1988, and taught there until he retired in May 2002. He taught many courses there including comparative vertebrate anatomy, meteorology, ecology, invertebrate zoology, entomology, botany, English grammar and report writing. Robin approached teaching with the same enthusiasm and gusto that he demonstrated in all other aspects of life, and he was an important mentor for many students.

In 1987, Robin and Maja divorced. In July 1989, he married Bonnie MacDonald, an Australian. Their careers on separate continents kept them apart for extended periods. That proved too difficult, so they parted ways in 1994, and divorced amicably in 1998.

Retirement Years

In retirement, Robin continued his research on spiders. In later years, his life and research partner was artist and educator Lorie Taylor Leech, whom he married in 2010. He and Lorie carried out spider survey work together at the Wagner Natural Area near Edmonton, and Robin was a co-author of a book chapter on spiders of the Canadian Prairies (Cárcamo et al. 2014).

In March 2012, Robin suffered a fall that broke his back and rendered him a paraplegic. Unable to properly examine spiders, he developed his latent interest in optics and binoculars, and published several technical papers on them. He continued sharing his enthusiasm and expertise on arthropods and optics, co-writing several popular articles featuring arthropod photographs (Bovee & Leech 2014; Popil & Leech 2015; Leech & Popil 2015).

Robin had always had an interest in grammar and the English language, at least as far back as his “minor” in English for his undergraduate degree. This was developed further in his teaching at NAIT. He coined the name “Ball words” for grammatically correct sequences of identical words, in honor of his thesis supervisor George Ball (Leech 1994). In later years, he wrote a popular book on puns (Leech 2015) that was illustrated by his wife Lorie Taylor Leech. In his final months, they were working together on a second volume.

Robin has published approximately 150 popular and scholarly articles, primarily on spiders but also on other arthropods and a few on other subjects such as ammunition and binoculars. Probably most notable were the results of his PhD work on amaurobiid spiders (Leech 1972).

Robin was a long-time member of the Entomological Society of Alberta and the Entomological Society of Canada. He served for decades as an Associate Editor of the ESC’s journal, *The Canadian Entomologist*. He was also a charter member of the American Arachnological Society.

Robin was a tireless proponent of the ASPB. He served as its Executive Director from 2002 to 2009. He was awarded an Honorary Life Membership with that society in 2013. The ASPB has created a University of Alberta graduate scholarship endowment in his memory. He was also heavily involved in the John Janzen Nature Centre in Edmonton, and was the founding president of the Edmonton Nature Centres Federation.

Over the course of his professional life, Robin amassed a large reprint collection, including some very old and rare items, and a large spider collection of approximately 75,000 specimens. Robin's spider collection has been donated to the University of Alberta's Strickland Museum.

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