

Awards and Citations

Response by James L. Goedert for the presentation of the 2019 Strimple Award of the Paleontological Society



First of all, I sincerely thank Kirk Johnson for nominating us for the Strimple Award, and to everyone who wrote letters of support for the nomination (I know who some of you are, but not everyone). It is sad that Gail is no longer with us, but she would have been pleased. Together, we explored many a muddy beach or creek bed, at all times of the year and in all kinds of weather, mostly in Oregon and Washington. This resulted in many discoveries that have become parts of scientific papers, and nothing quite matches the thrill of discovery. That, to us, is largely what kept us going—Paleontology is amazing because anyone has the potential to make a discovery that will be of some kind of importance to the science. Everyone can participate, and that is not true of many branches of science. You don't really need any special tools, ability, or training, just a good set of eyes, some patience, and the time and willingness to go for a walk. In many cases, we found fossils that were eventually the basis for new species and even genera, and all we really had to do was pick them up and carry them home because in much of the Pacific Northwest USA, fossils are preserved in nodules, and Mother Nature has already completed the excavation. In fact, we found most of the best and really important fossils without even breaking a rock.

The next step, of course, is finding the right paleontologist who is interested or willing to work on these specimens, and sometimes this is much harder than finding the fossils. Gail and I were always willing to help professional paleontologists and freely made available specimens we had collected or went out to search for material that we knew some researcher needed.

This led to many life-long friendships, and that is how we became more knowledgeable about both paleontology and geology—by working with these people in the field. So, while we had no professional training as paleontologists, all the training we did get was by professional paleontologists. It is important to remember that paleontologists are people too, and sometimes things will not work out as you might have hoped or wished. Sometimes your connection will be a dead-end, it has happened to us too, but most of the time it will be a fantastic experience. And if you keep looking, you will always find more fossils!

We were never motivated by, or interested in, building a personal collection. We learned what might be scientifically important and tried to focus on collecting specimens that might contribute some new data, or specimens that were better than those already in museum collections. We have contributed specimens to museums, not only in the U.S.A., but also to museums in Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, and Taiwan, to name a few. We also have gotten some criticism for this from people who feel that in some way we are sending abroad things that are part of the 'cultural patrimony' of Oregon or Washington. To us, this is ridiculous. The fossils are of animals that lived millions of years before any humans existed, much less before humans made up the present-day political boundaries that enclose where these fossils were found. What do the fossils have to do with human culture? And as we know, political boundaries tend to change through time anyway, measured in hundreds of years. Gail and I only cared that the fossils would be in an institution where they will be preserved and available for study, hopefully for perpetuity. And we have encouraged others to do the same and to think less provincially in considering where to donate their specimens. We have also tried to get people to understand what happens in museums and why the published study of a specimen can take so long. In fact, if you really want to understand why it can take so long for a fossil to get published, try to do it yourself. I did and have, and that is also quite an education. But, if you cannot accept criticism well, I'd advise that you do not attempt to write a scientific paper. It's an excellent process for revealing how much you don't know—both to yourself and to others!

Getting fossils published has always been our goal. So many amateur collectors say "why should I donate my fossil when it will just be in a drawer somewhere and likely never be displayed?" We reply with "why worry about a particular fossil ever being publicly displayed?" If the specimen gets published and figured (and even better if a 3D scan is made available) in a scientific journal, the fossil is 'displayed' to anyone around the world with a computer, smartphone, or tablet—potentially millions of people—basically anytime, anywhere, forever!

This always beats being in a museum display. Let the actual specimen rest safely in a drawer until it needs to be restudied.

I encourage all amateur paleontologists to participate in the science as fully as they are capable. Going beyond just being fossil collectors and actually working with paleontologists greatly enriched our lives, opened doors, and took us to many places in the world that we probably never would have visited otherwise. I cannot name everyone we have worked with over the years, because I will invariably forget to include someone. We have also had the good fortune to work with a lot of other

motivated amateur paleontologists as well. You all know who you are, and Gail and I are grateful for the friendships, tutoring, patience, hospitality, and good times over the decades. And again, thanks to all of you and the Paleontological Society for considering us to be worthy of this award.

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