



Archbold Expeditions

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A tribute to Mason Smoak

In the timeless tragedy of last Friday's plane crash in Placid Lakes, Highlands County lost two influential, admired, and much-loved members of our community; Mason Smoak from Lake Placid and Dave Maehr from the University of Kentucky and visiting scientist at Archbold Biological Station. They were both doing what they loved, dual adventurers in the sky, completing another valuable aerial survey of the Highlands County black bear population. Theirs was a great friendship and close partnership based on the common bond of conserving the remaining wilderness in Highlands County, a passion for research on black bears, and an insatiable interest in the data streaming in from the many radio- and satellite-collared bears they were both determined to find, track, and watch. Mason's loss, in addition to being a tragedy of countless dimensions for family and community, also represents a huge loss for ecological research and conservation in this county.

Over the past five years Dave Maehr's groundbreaking studies on Highlands County's black bear population would have been impossible but for Mason's incredible volunteerism, enthusiasm, and support. Without Mason there wouldn't have been a bear project. The Smoak family provided unlimited access to their large and beautiful ranch in Venus; prime bear habitat of flatwoods, bayhead and scrub, which became a focal location to trap and collar black bears. This access was combined with extraordinarily generous use of their field buggies and ATVs, the family camp house at the ranch, and never-ending practical day-to-day assistance helping Dave and his students set traps, handle bears, and retrieve collars. A couple of weeks ago Dave, who thought the world of Mason, sent an email describing a recent bear capture "we owe this one to Mason SmoakThis will be the first Highlands bear (#Male29) to get a non-number secondary name – Mason". Joe Guthrie, Dave's graduate student described Mason "out there, helping work up captured bears in the dark, holding a nut-driver in one hand and a failing flashlight between his teeth, swatting the mosquitoes away from the researcher's faces as they bent over a bear". Wade Ulrey, Dave's former graduate student, added that Mason's greatest contribution to the bear project was "his energy and ability piloting many crucial telemetry flights in his own airplane, often on short notice". He went out of his way to schedule flights, tearing away from busy work and family commitments to squeeze in a flight hour here and there. Watching that distinctive, yellow silhouetted plane circling over Archbold's property and the surrounding ranches of southern Highlands County gave you reassurance that all was well with the bears, and with bear research.

Aside from being a capable and intelligent hand in the field, Mason was a great friend and neighbor. Joe Guthrie, Dave's graduate student, has written that "He'd make sure we were invited to all the Smoak family holidays and, on more than one occasion, we took him up on his offer. Through Mason the entire Smoak family became surrogate family to us – Dave, Wade Ulrey, Joe Guthrie, John Henry Harrelson, and Sean Murphy. From inviting us over for dinner, or a boat ride, to taking us along with him on vacation, it was always apparent that there was nothing that he wouldn't do for us, or for any one of his friends. He was an extraordinary friend, and an extraordinary contributor to everything that he touched. We owe a special debt of gratitude to the entire Smoak family for their kindness and hospitality. They treated everyone

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allied with University of Kentucky and Archbold Biological Station with civility and generosity, and we cannot thank them enough.” In the acknowledgements section of his Masters’ thesis Wade Ulrey echoed these thoughts “Mason was not alone in his support of our bear project. I owe a great deal to the Smoak family for their kindness, hospitality, and pivotal role in protecting the black bears of Highlands County. They treated me as family and I will not forget them.”

The Smoak family, and Mason in particular, were tremendous ambassadors for Dave’s bear research, helping to recruit other landowners into the large network of critical study sites. Ray Royce (Highlands County Citrus Growers Association) wrote to Archbold of just “how passionate Mason was about Dave’s work and environmental stewardship in general. I saw Dave on Wednesday having lunch (Mason joined us there for lunch just after Dave left) and he came over and spoke to several of us about the project, and how he was now investigating how much the bears were feeding in the groves. I know that Dave and Mason spent Thursday night together planning their Friday trip and were great friends”. In a poignant and persuasive essay written in May 2008 Dave said “I know of at least three ranch families who openly display their love of bears. They do this by placing conservation easements on their land, by assisting those who study them, and by parading photographs of *their* resident bears (adorned with new radio collars) through local restaurants as though they were priceless trophies. Mostly, they do this by leaving the forests and bears alone.”

Mason sought neither reward nor attention for his huge contributions, but in 2005, at Dave’s instigation, Mason Smoak was honored with Disney’s *2005 Conservation Hero Award for North America*, a great accolade in the conservation community for “his efforts to manage and protect the ecological integrity of the Smoak family’s Turkey Track Ranch, and for going above and beyond to support the bear research project”. His contributions raised the profile of black bears in Highlands County, revealed the habitats bears rely upon, documented the vast open spaces they need for survival, and showed us the new locations and landscape corridors we had never known they used. It is unclear, at present, exactly how Archbold Biological Station, University of Kentucky, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation, and Dave’s many colleagues and former and current graduate students will continue this vital research and conservation work. But we know one thing, as long as black bears move across the great ranches and wilderness of Highlands County, the remarkable spirit and great camaraderie of Mason and Dave, and everything it inspired, will stay with us all.

Archbold’s thoughts, condolences, and our deepest sympathy go out to the entire Smoak family here in Florida, and to Dave’s family in Lexington, Kentucky.

Hilary Swain, Archbold Biological Station, 6/24/2008



Dave Maehr (foreground), Mason Smoak (background) and Marta Gandolfi processing a recent black bear capture on 6/15/2008, Highlands County, FL.