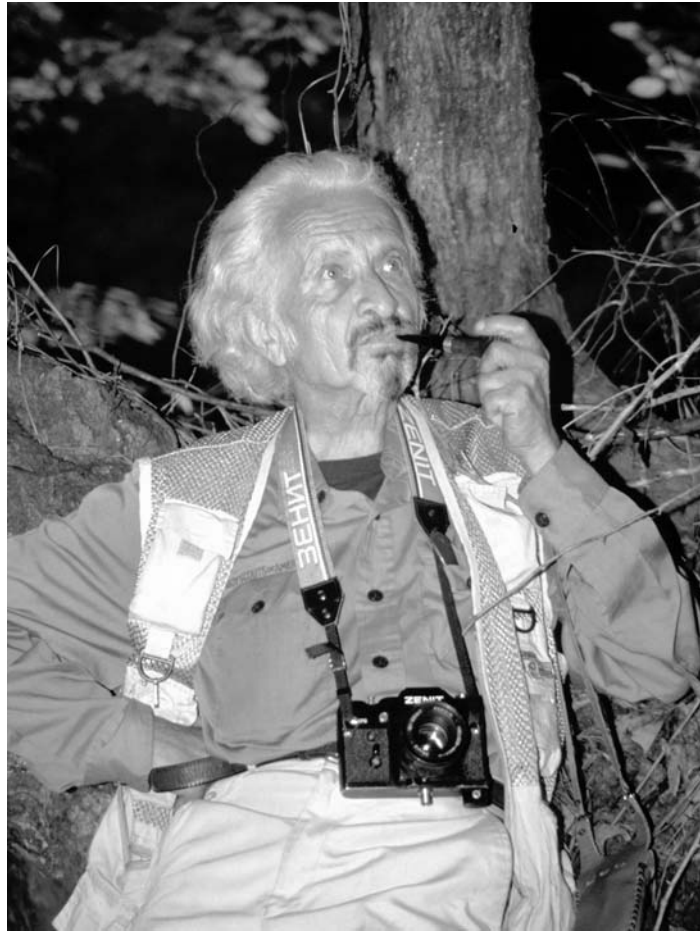


BANISTERIA

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE NATURAL HISTORY OF VIRGINIA



Roger H. de Rageot (1931-2006)

Roger H. de Rageot was a renaissance naturalist who worked for the former Norfolk Museum of Natural History from 1952 to 1967. This issue contains an obituary and the first half of his unpublished manuscript on the natural history of the Great Dismal Swamp and nearby areas.

MISCELLANEA

Obituary

**Roger Henry de Rageot
(1931-2006)**

An article on Roger Henry (or Henri) de Rageot in the *Virginian Pilot* after his death noted that he never lived a normal life. That was an understatement. Roger was well known for his Spartan life in the Norfolk, Virginia, area where he lived most of his life after emigrating from Europe, and for his propensity to eat road kills and snakes. He was one of the old-time naturalists who was equally at home in the arts. Indeed, many of his writings were as much artistic flair as they were scientific papers. He has been called a naturalist, explorer, museum curator, photographer, painter, author, and eccentric. In fact, he was all of these things. Roger Rageot (Fig. 1) was born in France on 22 June 1931, and grew up in the Charolais cattle region. He endured the German occupation there during World War II and caught wild game for food. Roger and his sister emigrated and arrived in the United States by ship in 1947 to settle in Maryland. He finished high school at the Sacred Hearts High School in La Plata, Maryland, where he learned English. He took some zoology courses at Washington University during 1949-1952 and at the College of William and Mary in 1952-1956, but did not attain a college degree. He worked



Fig. 1. Roger Rageot in the 1950s at the Norfolk Museum of Natural History with the characteristic scarf around his neck. Photographer unknown.

with the Smithsonian Institution mammal collection before moving to Virginia. He got the curator job at the Norfolk Museum of Natural History in 1951 and worked there until 1967. Roger attended Old Dominion College (now University) part-time between 1952 and 1956. He spent 1957-1958 in France where he obtained a degree in "License of Natural Science."

Roger was initially paid as a night watchman at the museum but worked on natural history exhibits during the day. He did his own taxidermy, collected his own specimens, built the dioramas, and educated the public through lectures to school groups and public speaking. He was an invited member of the American Association of Museums in 1954. Roger's home was a Norfolk apartment in Gent where he kept several animals, including an adult Gila Monster (*Heloderma suspectum*) given to him by Howard K. Gloyd.

Funding was tight at the museum and Roger supplemented his income by collecting specimens of all sorts for profit by selling them to researchers and museums. Numerous specimen labels on snails, insects, millipedes, birds, bats, other mammals, fish, and of course amphibians and reptiles remain extant in several museums. He also sent specimens free to researchers like Howard K. Gloyd who was studying copperheads and cottonmouths and Roger Conant who was studying watersnakes. And, of course, he supplemented his diet with road kills and the occasional Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*, Fig. 2). Roger applied to other museums throughout the country in 1956 and 1962 to apparently gain better wages and even received an offer or two, turning them down to stay in Tidewater.

Roger created watercolor paintings that ultimately sold for hundreds of dollars. Some of his pen-and-ink illustrations appeared on the cover and in the Art Feature of the Philadelphia Herpetological Society (PHS) Bulletin in 1963 and in Virginia Wildlife in 1964. The PHS Bulletin cover illustration of a Green Treefrog (*Hyla cinerea*) is reprinted as Fig. 3, and a Diamond-backed Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*) drawing as Fig. 4. Photos of a Canada Warbler (*Wilsonia canadensis*), Whitetail Deer fawn (*Odocoileus virginianus*), Copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*), and thorn bugs were published recently in *The Nature Handbook* by E. H. Williams, Jr. (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Unfortunately, in 1967 the museum's board did away with the natural history section and made it into an exclusively art museum. There was a big public outcry but the natural history museum and Roger were history. Roger then took whatever inheritance he had, bought a Toyota Land Cruiser and lots of supplies, and



Fig. 2. Roger Rageot in the 1950s on his scooter with a Snapping Turtle (*Chelydra serpentina*) headed home for dinner. Photographer unknown.

wandered throughout much of Central and South America for two years. He traveled, usually alone, through most of the countries in Central America, being robbed in British Honduras along the way. His first destination was French Guiana for which he carried a letter of introduction from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, S. Dillon Ripley. The Smithsonian Institution provided collecting supplies so that Roger could collect specimens in remote places. He was back in the United States in 1971 seeking funding for another tropical expedition.

His 1973 Peace Corps year was spent in Chile where he taught and worked on seeking ways to control Vampire Bat predation on cattle. He and a colleague ingeniously mixed a poison with petroleum jelly to apply to the bats' backs. They would fly back to their roosts and groom each other, infecting as many as 50 others. It was very effective. Roger remained in South America until 1980. He apparently contracted Hodgkin's disease later that year and came back to the United States to be treated successfully. He was not considered in remission until 1984 when he returned to Norfolk for semi-retirement. Roger remained active in local natural history excursions and occasionally spent time in Ecuador until he was too frail and weak to travel again. His cancer apparently came back in 2006

and he died from that and respiratory disease on 7 October 2006.

Roger Rageot was a co-founder of the Virginia Herpetological Society and its third president (1963-64). He contributed several articles, especially one on the amphibians and reptiles of Surry County (Rageot, 1965). He worked as the naturalist and director for several summers at the Pipsico Boy Scout Reservation and reported valuable natural history observations on the county's herpetofauna. He later (Rageot, 1969) reported on three rare species from Surry County – Oak Toad (*Bufo quercicus*), Barking Treefrog (*Hyla gratiosa*), and Eastern Spadefoot (*Scaphiopus holbrookii*). Roger also provided confirmation, a shell, of the state endangered Chicken Turtle (*Deirochelys reticularia*) in Virginia at Seashore State Park (now First Landing State Park) (Rageot, 1968).

Roger's first love in Virginia was the Great Dismal Swamp. During his 16-yr period with the Norfolk Museum, he spent many, many nights in the swamp with only a few blankets, sandwiches, and a few tins of food. He took notes on everything, not just amphibians and reptiles. His collections of animals ended up as stuffed display specimens in the museum's dioramas, scientific specimens in herpetological collections such as the Smithsonian Institution and other museums, and live animals in exhibits. His fieldwork in the Swamp was supported by small grants from the Virginia Academy of Science in 1953 and 1957.

Around 1960 Roger wrote a large manuscript based on his excursions and natural history observations in the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina. He tried to get it published by as many as 10 book publishers but was apparently unable to make it happen. It was accompanied by 85 pen and ink drawings. Some



Fig. 3. An example of Roger Rageot's pen-and-ink drawings. This one of a Green Treefrog (*Hyla cinerea*) was on the cover of the Philadelphia Herpetological Society Bulletin in 1963.



Fig. 4. A second example of Roger Rageot's pen-and-ink drawings. This one of a Diamond-backed Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*) was in the art section of the Philadelphia Herpetological Society Bulletin in 1963.

of these drawings cannot now be located but some of those available are published in the following manuscript. Roger loved the Dismal Swamp. His attraction to it was not only scientific but also spiritual and literary. He gained his inner strength just being there and being one with the swamp ecosystem.

Roger also wrote several very different articles and papers, from magazine articles on the supernatural to scientific papers on natural history. Although he had some training as a scientist, his approach to life and natural history was artistic. He saw and felt art in nature and some of his writing reflected this inner connection. All of the papers known to us are listed in the bibliography. It is not an extensive list, but it is quite varied and broad in scope. "The Apparition," a story in a 1963 issue of Fate Magazine (but not located by us), devoted to tales of the supernatural and unexplained, was part of a series of stories that Roger grouped into a collection called "Rageot's Horrors." We have unfortunately been unable to find this collection.

During his tenure in Norfolk while at the museum and in later years after returning from the tropics, Roger (Fig. 5) appeared in numerous newspaper articles throughout the Tidewater area. He became something of a noted naturalist and was sought after for identification on many types of animals, fossils, and even some invertebrates. His eccentricities, like eating road kills and spending long periods of time in the Dismal Swamp by himself, were extolled in complimentary fashion by at least two reporters late in life. And the announcement of his death was covered by one of them with a sort of reverence for his gifts to Tidewater natural history, education, and his unusual life style.

The late Joseph Campbell, noted philosopher and professor of comparative mythology, extolled the virtues and value of making one's way in life. "Follow

your bliss" is his most well-known phrase. Roger Rageot followed his bliss. He did what was right for him. And he did not care what other people thought about him. In the process, he gave far more than he received and he gave it with grace, humility, and dignity. He was fond of saying that he was a French count by heredity, a distinction disputed by his sister. But even if he was not really of royal descent, he surely acted that way. Virginia's natural history, especially herpetology, benefited from his service in the defunct Norfolk Museum of Natural History, public education, and his portrayal and love of the Great Dismal Swamp.

Papers and Articles Written by Roger H. de Rageot

Old, W. E., Jr., & R. H. Rageot. 1956. Land snails of Nansemond, Norfolk, and Princess Anne counties, Virginia. *Virginia Journal of Science* 7: 87-90.

Rageot, R. H. 1955. A new northernmost record of the yellow bat, *Dasypterus floridanus*. *Journal of Mammalogy* 56: 456.

Rageot, R. H. 1957. Predation on small mammals in the Dismal Swamp, Virginia. *Journal of Mammalogy* 38: 281.

Rageot, R. H. 1959. Awakening of the swampland. *Virginia Herpetological Society Bulletin* 10: 2.

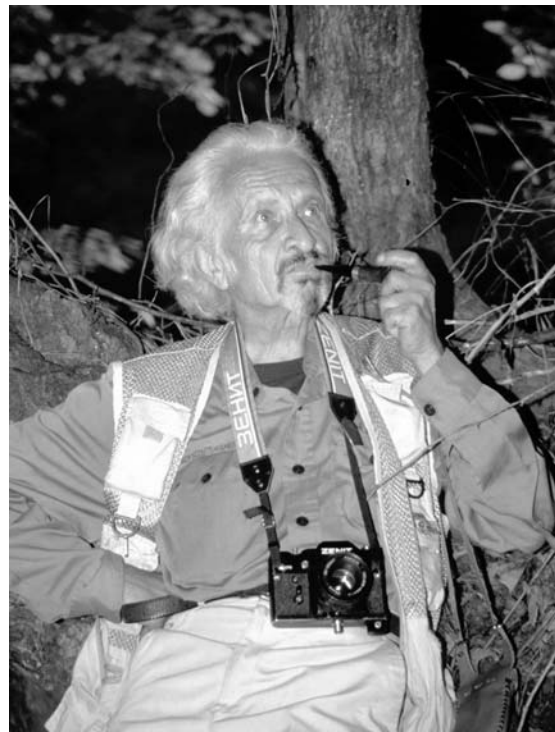


Fig. 5. Roger Rageot at Jericho Ditch, Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia in September 2002. Photograph by David Liebman.

Rageot, R. H. 1963. Locket from the dead. *Fate Magazine* 16 (November): 48-51.

Rageot, R. H. 1963. Message to VHS members from the society's president. *Virginia Herpetological Society Bulletin* 35: 3.

Rageot, R. H. 1964. The golden mouse. *Virginia Wildlife* 25 (February): 10-11.

Rageot, R. H. 1964. The strange semi-tropical world of the salamanders. *Virginia Wildlife* 25 (April): 12, 17-18.

Rageot, R. H. 1964. Herpetofauna of Surry County, Virginia. *Virginia Herpetological Society Bulletin* 40: 3-6.

Rageot, R. H. 1965. The golden mouse. *Defenders of Wildlife News* (January): 58-59.

Rageot, R. H. 1965. An introduction to the Great Dismal Swamp. *Wildlife in North Carolina* (May): 7-9, 23.

Rageot, R. H. 1967. I seek the shadow of my love. *Fate Magazine* 20 (July): 42-50.

Rageot, R. H. 1968. The occurrence of the eastern chicken turtle in southeastern Virginia. *Virginia Herpetological Society Bulletin* 57: 2.

Rageot, R. H. 1969. Observations regarding three rare amphibians in Surry Co. *Virginia Herpetological Society Bulletin* 63: 3-5.

Rageot, R. H. 1992. Observations on the mammals of Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia and North Carolina. *Banisteria* 1: 11-13.

Rageot, R. H. 1992. Notes on the swampfish (*Chologaster cornuta* Agassiz) in the Dismal Swamp of Virginia. *Banisteria* 1: 17-18.

Wood, J. T., F. G. Cary, & R. H. Rageot. 1955. The nesting and eggs of the dusky salamander, *Desmognathus fuscus* Raf. in southeastern Virginia. *Virginia Journal of Science* 6: 149-152.

Wood, J. T., & R. H. Rageot. 1955. Eggs of the slimy salamander in Isle of Wight County, Virginia. *Virginia Journal of Science* 6: 85-87.

Wood, J. T., & R. H. Rageot. 1963. The nesting of the many-lined salamander in the Dismal Swamp. *Virginia Journal of Science* 13: 121-125.

Joseph C. Mitchell
Department of Biology
University of Richmond
Richmond, Virginia 23173

David Liebman
981 South Quail Street
Norfolk, Virginia 22513

My Favorite Story About Roger Rageot

The scene is the south bank of the James River in Surry County, Virginia in the early 1960s. Around 200 teen-age Boy Scouts and their counselors have arrived in their summer camp on a bluff overlooking the James River. This was once "Plantation Country." Not far away is the site of the first permanent English settlement in America.

After evening chow the campers returned to their tents to ready themselves for that event's great campfire; the first of the season. There they would be introduced to the camp's key staff.

At dusk the scouts file into the council ring where the first campfire of that season is lit. Each adult leader is introduced by name and title of his camp job. The adult leaders are greeted with respect; ... one of them ... with awe!

Upon introduction the nature director stepped into the glow of the campfire and nodded to the assemblage. Night-time shadows were moving in rapidly on the gathering. The camp naturalist was in the spotlight. Then, he gave two short high-pitched whistles. From the halo of tree-boughs above the council-ring a great bird flew to the small figure below and lit on his shoulder!

It was a large bird with dark wings and a light-colored front. The bird's long tail had white circles evenly-spaced on its feathers. It balanced itself with that tail as it perched on the naturalist's shoulder! A gasp of disbelief escaped from the gathering. Nothing further needed to be said: This was a pre-eminent camp naturalist!

To understand how such a thing could happen requires one to step back in time to see what went on during the preceding week before the camp opened. A nestling Yellow-billed Cuckoo had fallen from its perch on a tree-limb. It was picked up by a sympathetic naturalist. He fed the young bird until it was ready to fledge properly. Rageot combined several ingredients to provide the bird with a balanced diet. Fruit, insects, chopped nuts, a dash of bone-meal went into the mix. The young bird flourished on the mash gulping it down when offered. In the process a great bond formed between the bird and its friend! Knowing that doesn't wash away the magic ... it enhances it!

Franklin J. Tobey, II
11175 Edwards Farm Lane
Purcellville, Virginia 20132-1909

Editors' note: Mr. Tobey and Mr. Rageot were among the six cofounders of the Virginia Herpetological Society in 1958.