James A. Organ (1931-2015)

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James (Jim) Albert Organ spent a lifetime researching plethodontid salamanders, especially within the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (MRNRA) in southwestern Virginia. He contributed greatly to Virginia herpetology and was a lifetime member of the Virginia Herpetological Society. Jim's research is considered a benchmark for other plethodontid salamander courtship and life history work. However, a long-lasting memory of Jim Organ will be his role as an ambassador for plethodontid salamanders in the MRNRA.

Jim Organ was born on 29 March 1931 in Newark, New Jersey and was introduced to science, especially salamanders, as a participant in the junior museum program at the Newark Museum. Following high school, Jim enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and earned the rank of staff sergeant. After serving his country, Jim earned an A.B. degree from the Newark College of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University, graduating with high honors in the natural history curriculum and special honors in biology. At Rutgers, Jim meet Della Sprague, a fellow biology major, in an embryology course. Jim and Della were married in 1956 and the couple enjoyed 57 years of marriage until Della's death in 2013. Della was a faithful confidant and always accompanied Jim during his field collections and for most of his laboratory courtship trials. In 1956, the couple also moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan for Jim to begin graduate school and for Della to obtain a B.S. in Zoology. They had two daughters Linda Joyce, born in 1960, and Sylvia Fawn, in 1963.

Jim obtained an M.S. (1958) and Ph.D. (1960) from the University of Michigan while under the direction of Charles M. Walker. Jim chose Whitetop Mountain and Mount Rogers for his study sites after falling in love with southwest Virginia during a field trip throughout the Southern Appalachian Mountains following Emmitt Reid Dunn's trail. Jim's master's thesis was on the courtship and reproduction of *Plethodon jordani* (now *montanus*) and *P. glutinosus* (now c*ylindraceous*), as well as the life history of *P. welleri* (Organ 1958, 1960a, 1960b). For his dissertation, Jim wanted to expand upon the work of Nelson Hairston (1949) in North Carolina where he documented elevational gradients of plethodontid salamanders. Jim established

elevational transects and recorded salamander distributions at 100' intervals on both northern and southern slopes of Whitetop and Bluff Mountains as well as Mount Rogers. Jim's dissertation research created the foundation for a long term study to examine elevational distributions in what would later become the MRNRA. It was the first substantial salamander work in the Whitetop Mountain region of Virginia. Jim's research also included life histories, population ecology, and reproduction of five species of desmognathine salamanders (Organ 1961a). During his research, he collected over 12,000 salamanders, 7,000 of which were *Desmognathus*, and all are in the University of Michigan, Museum of Zoology collection. As a portion of his dissertation, Jim also documented the courtship and life history of *Gyrinophilus porphyriticus* and *Desmognathus wright* (now *organi*) from the MRNRA (Organ 1961b, 1961c). From his work at Mount Lake Biological Station, Jim recorded the courtship of *Eurycea lucifuga* and *Pseudotriton ruber* (Organ 1968, Organ and Organ 1968).

Jim continued to work within the MRNRA and focused his attention on long term studies of salamander distributions throughout his career. From 1990 to 1991, the U.S. Forest Service contracted with Jim and Della to repeat his dissertation surveys and to include additional areas within the MRNRA (Organ 1990, 1991). Based on his recommendations, the U.S. Forest Service created a salamander management zone that protected most areas above 4,000 feet within the MRNRA. Jim also recommended the elimination of commercial collection of salamanders for fishing bait, and the carefully examined collection requests to MRNRA staff to ensure they had scientific merit. *Desmognathus organi* (formerly *D. wright*; Northern Pygmy Salamander) was named after Jim Organ for lifetime of salamander conservation (Crespi et al. 2010).

For 31 years (1961-1992) Jim was a faculty member at The City College of the City University of New York, serving as the department chair and executive of the Ph.D. program. During summer breaks, Jim and Della would return to southwestern Virginia to conduct field work. They built a cabin at the base of Mount Rogers in Konnarock, VA and made it their permanent residence in 1999 after Jim's retirement in 1995. Even during retirement, Jim and Della continued their passion for salamanders as they led interpretive hikes and gave programs on plethodontid salamanders, including the keynote speech for the 1996 Mount Rogers Naturalist Rally. Many researchers working in the MRNRA benefited from Jim's guidance, and he provided advice and insight for modern resurveys of his historical datasets. Jim and Della were also great salamander ambassadors to the local community surrounding the MRNRA. Fears of endangered species and land seizures were often calmed with Jim's knowledgeable conversations. Local residents knew Jim and Della and they were well respected. Some local residents even coined the nickname the "salamaster" for Jim.

Jim Organ died on January 16, 2015 in Konnarock, Virginia. His impact on plethodontid salamanders, especially in the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, will be long remembered and serve as a testament to a lifetime of hard work.

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Jim and Dell Organ celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary in 2006 at the Konnarock, VA community center.

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