

## Award for Distinguished Scholarship

Len Reitsma, Professor of Zoology

In 1985, Len Reitsma and his wife Denise bought a centuries-old farmhouse on a 115-acre American Tree Farm in Canaan, New Hampshire. While he knew the location would allow them to have the home they dreamed of, Reitsma also saw the value of protecting the land for future generations and recognized the potential of the property and the surrounding region as a field site for his ornithology research. When Reitsma accepted a position as professor of zoology in Plymouth State University's biological sciences department in 1992, the proximity of the property to campus proved beneficial to his students as well, giving Reitsma an opportunity to share his passion for birds with many of the students he teaches. "I've always loved birds, and it's a feeling that has grown since I picked up binoculars and a field guide when I was 14," Reitsma explains. "It is such a joy to mentor my students' curiosity about birds, especially when their enthusiasm grows into a passion of their own."

Reitsma's research is an essential element of his teaching, and in the classroom, he integrates the two seamlessly, connecting examples from his work, and the work of his collaborators, with the topic the class is discussing. Each spring, students trek to Canaan, where Reitsma sets up mist nets to interrupt birds' flight paths to feeders on the property. Students have a chance to remove birds from the nets, process them to score their fat, and measure their wings and tails before setting them free. Data are cataloged for students to use as part of class research. Then, each summer in what Reitsma calls a "serious flow of students through our backyard," some of these students return to live in a second small house on the tree farm and work as field techs during the bird breeding season, collecting high-quality data and collaborating with Reitsma, frequently earning positions as co-authors in published research.



Kaleb Hart '11 photo.

For Reitsma, the collaboration with colleagues and students—and the resulting connections made throughout his career—have been essential to the success of his projects. "It's natural to keep the interest of students in mind when we look for opportunities for collaboration. We have a student in our graduate program who is defending his thesis, which centers around work he did in Ecuador in collaboration with a bird researcher I know from Sweden, and I am currently co-advising a student researching bird diversity in the Cardamom Hills in India," Reitsma notes. "Earlier this year, I was asked to speak at a conference in Ottawa, Canada, about the Canada Warbler, a species I have been studying for many years. The Canadian government is developing a conservation plan because they've just added the warbler to their threatened species list. Through this conference, I built relationships with two new collaborators from Canada."

Reitsma adds that these collaborative research partnerships, and the chance to co-author papers with faculty, have special value for those students working to earn a master of science in biology, where a 12-credit thesis forms the capstone of the degree. "The goal of our department is for students to use their thesis, and recognition they've earned through authorship, to catapult them into the next phase of their career."

Of course, none of Reitsma's research would be possible without the land, so he is equally passionate about conservation. "With birds as my research concentration, I have the opportunity to enable students to focus on another species in its natural environment. Doing research on birds is an excellent way to give students an intimate connection to concerns about habitat and environment for non-human species. To see students recognize and appreciate the beauty that's around us and help them understand the impact we as humans can have on the natural environment makes the time spent with them more of a privilege than a job for me."

— Donna Eason '85



Distinguished Professional, Administrative, and Technical Staff (PAT) Award



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Patricia Storer PAT (Professional, Administrative, and Technical) Award

