

Robert Gravem Webb (1927–2018): Specialist on Trionychid Turtles and Mexican Herpetology

Robert “Bob” Webb, beloved emeritus professor and curator of herpetology at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), passed away on 18 September 2018 at the age of 91 in San Angelo, Texas. He is survived by wife Patricia Ann Peden (married 1985), stepson Christopher Webb, and five grandchildren—Simon Webb, Sebastian Webb, Gunner Webb, Seth Webb, and Sawyer Webb. Bob was born on 18 February 1927 to Edward Walter Webb and Eva Berg Gravem Webb in Long Beach, California (Anonymous 1960; Henderson 2012; Anonymous 2018; Martinez 2019). Towards the end of World War II, he served in the US Navy as a seaman first-class and hospital apprentice from 1945–1946. He worked at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Corona, California and received the World War II Victory Medal for his service. He was discharged as a pharmacist mate 3rd class on 6 November 1946 (P. Peden, pers. comm., December 2018).

Bob’s academic career commenced just after the war with a B.S. degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1950, where he studied comparative anatomy and herpetology with Arthur I. Ortenburger, who became Bob’s Master’s adviser at the same institution (Adler 2007; Henderson 2012). While conveniently employed as a curatorial assistant (Anonymous 1960), Bob’s thesis work focused on the reptiles of Oklahoma, based on collections made by him and Ortenburger. Bob’s impressive thesis was 282 pages long, and nearly two decades later, this work led to his 370-page opus *Reptiles of Oklahoma*, dedicated to Ortenburger, who he dubbed “the Father of Oklahoma Herpetology” (Webb 1970). Following the completion of his Master’s thesis in 1952 (Henderson 2012), Bob traveled to Lake Texoma at the Oklahoma-Texas border, where he joined the famous Tulane University turtle crew as a research assistant (Anonymous 1960). Led by Fred Cagle, the crew included, at different times, Case Chaney, Clarence Smith, Richard Etheridge, Paul Anderson, Ernie Liner, Donald Tinkle (Fig. 1), Ned Lambermont, Walter Stone, Howard Suzuki, Bob Gordon, and Cagle’s teenage son, Fred Ray Jr. In 1952, the crew collected turtles from several rivers in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Alabama, and Mississippi as they meandered back to New Orleans. Webb joined the crew again in 1953, this time including Don Blair and F. C. Johnson, for a field season that sampled a wide swath from Florida to Mexico. In 1954, Webb led



FIG. 1. Donald W. Tinkle (left) and Robert G. Webb holding a Cottonmouth (*Agkistrodon piscivorus*) at Tulane University’s Sarpy Wildlife Refuge in St. Charles Parish, Louisiana. Given the publication date of Tinkle’s work at the site (Tinkle 1959), this undated photograph is likely from the mid-1950s when Webb was working for the Tulane turtle crew.

the crew with Tinkle in a long collecting trip across the southeastern US. Bob left Tulane to pursue his doctorate at the University of Kansas (KU), where he became a teaching assistant from 1955–1956 (Anonymous 1960; Lindeman 2013).

In his book *Their Blood Runs Cold*, Whit Gibbons (1996) recalled an incident with the Tulane turtle crew that highlighted the dangers of their highly successful method to collect at night. Bob had leaned over the bow and whisked a small Ringed Sawback Turtle (*Graptemys oculifera*) into the boat. When he leaned over again, he screamed in pain as a large slider turtle (*Trachemys*) latched onto his Adam’s apple and wouldn’t let go. “In fact, ten minutes passed before Bob was free. A surgical operation at night on the Pearl River with only a greasy pair of pliers and a screwdriver takes time.” Gibbons, who joined the turtle crew as a teenager, recalled, “I was in junior high school at the time, so was only a kid who got to tag along, but Bob always seemed quiet, shy, and a very pleasant individual. Nonetheless, he appeared to be completely unintimidated by what might be encountered in the untamed outdoors, including the southern rivers being studied. Of all of the people associated with the Tulane Field Studies at the time, Don Tinkle and others held the greatest respect for Bob Webb, both as herpetologist and individual. Bob’s legacy includes his many published papers on the taxonomy and ecology of turtles over more than a half century” (W. Gibbons, pers. comm., January 2019).

While studying at KU in the mid-1950s and early 1960s under the mentorship of Henry S. Fitch, Bob spent a lot of time with legendary turtle expert John M. Legler (Vogt 2015), and together with other herpetology graduate students, they had weekly “brown bag lunches” with Edward H. Taylor in his small office in Snow Hall (Fig. 2) (Webb 1978). Based on fieldwork in Mexico with Charles M. Fugler and other biologists associated with the university, Bob contributed 856 herpetological specimens to the collections at KU (Duellman 2015). He left KU briefly to work as an instructor for West Texas State University (now West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas) from 1957–1958, but returned to work as a research associate at the KU museum while completing his Ph.D. entitled “Recent Soft-shelled Turtles of North America (Family Trionychidae),” which he successfully defended and published in 1960 and 1962, respectively (Anonymous 1960; Webb 1962; Henderson 2012). Based on the examination of an astonishing 1849 specimens, Bob’s dissertation work became essential reading for anyone interested in North American trionychids, as one of us (EG) learned during his Master’s work with *Apalone spinifera* (Greenbaum and Carr 2001, 2002). In a letter to Bob dated 28 May 1962, herpetologist Philip W. Smith lauded the dissertation work by saying, “you put an enormous

ELI GREENBAUM

University of Texas at El Paso, Department of Biological Sciences,
 El Paso, Texas 79968, USA; e-mail: egreenbaum2@utep.edu

MINGNA V. ZHUANG

University of Texas at El Paso Biodiversity Collections,
 Department of Biological Sciences, El Paso, Texas 79968, USA;
 e-mail: mzhuang@utep.edu

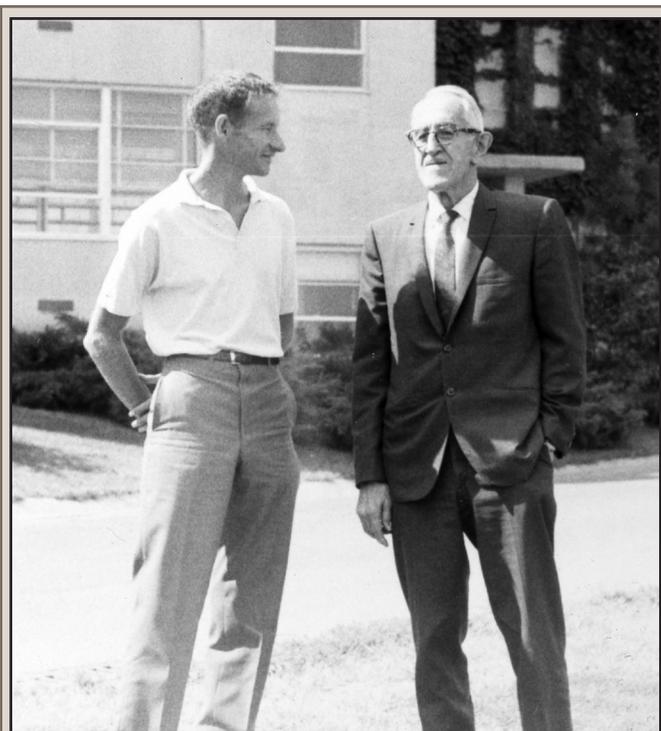


FIG. 2. Robert G. Webb (left) and Edward H. Taylor behind Snow Hall, University of Kansas, ca. 1969. This photograph was first published in an obituary for Taylor by Webb (1978).

amount of labor into this study, and you did a superb job. The result is a very thorough, carefully planned, beautifully written and expertly edited piece of work that ranks with the best of monographs.”

In 1962, Bob joined UTEP as a faculty member and taught several courses in the Department of Biological Sciences, including Introductory Biology (BIOL 1106), Human Physiology (BIOL 1212), Evolution (BIOL 3321), Embryology (ZOO 3301), Lower Vertebrates (ZOO 3476), Herpetology (ZOO 3505), Fish, Amphibians and Reptiles (ZOO 4476), and graduate courses in Biosystematics (BIOL 5316) and Herpetology (BIOL 5305). Bob was granted tenure in 1970 and transitioned to professor emeritus in 1992. His CV and newspaper clippings from this three-decade period chronicle several notable achievements. Bob served on the editorial board for *Journal of The Ohio Herpetological Society* from 1965–1967, and *Journal of Herpetology* from the publication's inception in 1968 until 1971 (Adler 2016).

In 1970, Bob organized the herpetology collections at the Museum of Arid Land Biology (the precursor to the UTEP Biodiversity Collections) with the first curator of herpetology, Richard Worthington. As part of this effort, he commenced the herpetology catalog, a hefty tome in which he handwrote over 20,000 entries out of the current 21,947 specimens in the collections (C. Lieb, pers. comm., May 2019). He was appointed as a research associate in herpetology by the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History in 1975. In 1978, he became a “non-resident fellow” of The Explorers Club. That same year, based on the Oklahoma book and 65 other publications, an anonymous consultant said Bob was “among the top six in the nation and top dozen in the world in his field,” and as a result, he received the prestigious UTEP Faculty Research Award (Anonymous 1978). The following year he served as President-Elect of the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (serving as President

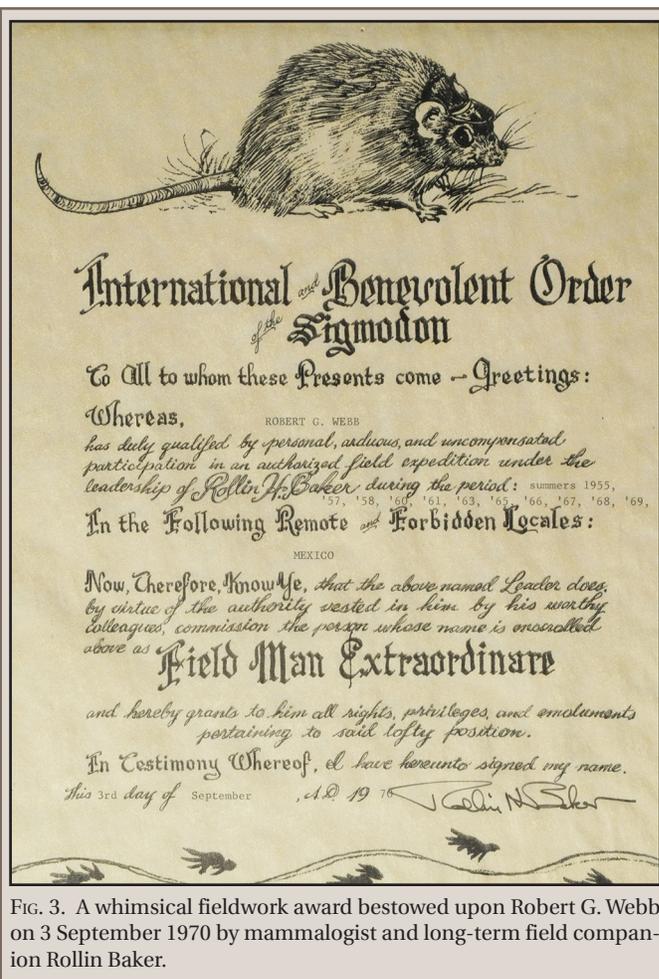


FIG. 3. A whimsical fieldwork award bestowed upon Robert G. Webb on 3 September 1970 by mammalogist and long-term field companion Rollin Baker.

in 1980), and he also received funds from the Smithsonian to travel to India to complete taxonomic work on soft-shelled turtles (Anonymous 1979; Moriarty and Bartholomew 2007). In 1980, he became a member of the IUCN's Tortoise Group for the Species Survival Commission, and in 1986 he became a member of the Herpetological Recovery Team for the US Fish and Wildlife Service Region 2 (Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico).

Soon after his arrival at UTEP, Bob shifted most of his herpetological focus to Mexico, where he had been collecting since 1955. That first trip through Sonora, Sinaloa, Durango, Coahuila, Mexico City, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz was made with Fugler and mammalogist Rollin Baker, who had been one of Bob's instructors at KU before he moved to Michigan State University in 1955, where he eventually served as director of their museum (Baker 2005; Phillips et al. 2009). According to Bob's field notes from 1955–1978, his trips to Mexico were frequent and extensive, often occurring over the entire summer. In 1957, Bob and Baker, along with several other Americans, drove from Lawrence, Kansas to Nuevo León, Coahuila, Durango, Zacatecas, Jalisco, Sinaloa, and Nayarit. Similar trips occurred in 1958 (mostly in Durango), 1959 (one trip to Sonora and another to Coahuila, Durango, and Chihuahua), 1960 (Durango, Sinaloa, Coahuila, and Chihuahua), and 1961 (one trip to Chihuahua and Sinaloa, and another to Durango, Sinaloa, Nayarit, and Tamaulipas). Starting in 1962, Bob's position at UTEP was an ideal location for additional expeditions, and he made annual trips, sometimes twice per year, which were focused on northwestern Mexico.



FIG. 4. Playa Azul, Durango, Mexico in July 1972. From left, Rodolfo Corrales, Robert G. Webb, Mary Baker, and Rollin Baker.



FIG. 5. *Sternotherus depressus*, described by Tinkle and Webb (1955).

After years of fieldwork together, Baker bestowed Bob (aka “Webby,” Baker’s nickname for Bob) with his whimsical “International and Benevolent Order of the Sigmodon” (Fig. 3), a likely nod to the former man’s childhood fascination with cotton rats in suburban Houston (Baker 2005). According to a series of letters, Bob, Baker, and his wife Mary decided to buy land at Playa Azul (Durango, Mexico) where they collected repeatedly in the 1970s. The purchase was facilitated in 1971 after at least two years of negotiation with their friend Rodolfo Corrales (Fig. 4), but the complex international deal required sharing of the deed by several people, including Rodolfo’s son Luis. By 1980, visits to Playa Azul were tapering off, and shortly before Luis died in 1980, everyone decided to sell the land. The sale was hastened when crops of illegal drugs were found on some of the property and the Mexican government threatened to confiscate it (J. Johnson, pers. comm., February 2019). Starting in 1973, many of Bob’s collecting trips were made with the late Ralph W. Axtell (1928–2016) of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Axtell’s interests in the lizard faunas of the southwestern US and northern Mexico were well-matched to Bob’s, and the two made summer trips together virtually every year from 1980 on, well into Bob’s retirement in the mid-2000s (C. Lieb, pers. comm., May 2019).

Bob was the major adviser for several Master’s students at UTEP, and served on the thesis committee for many others,



FIG. 6. *Lampropeltis greeri* was described by Robert Webb (1961) based on a snake he and J. Keever Greer discovered in a sprung mouse trap in the Sierra Madre Occidental of Durango, Mexico. The taxonomic distinctiveness of *L. greeri* was short-lived, however, as by 1965, Gehlbach and McCoy (1965) placed it in the synonymy of a composite *L. mexicana*. Decades later, *L. greeri* was resurrected as a full species, validating Webb’s earlier assessment (Hansen and Salmon 2017).



FIG. 7. Robert G. Webb’s wedding party in 1985. From left, Richard C. Lovelace, Rollin Baker, Robert G. Webb, Carl S. Lieb, Jerry D. Johnson (the best man), James Koschmann, and Peter Chrapliwy.

including William L. Roueche III (1971), Robert M. Kinniburgh (1972), James R. Koschmann (1972), John K. Korky (1972), Jerry D. Johnson (1975), George M. Ferguson (1982), Leroy H. Banicki (1982), David A. Kizirian (1987), Christopher R. Harrison (1992), Travis J. LaDuc (1996), and Alvaro Dominguez (2000). Korky recalled his adviser’s warm personality and impressive energy for fieldwork. “I earned my M.S. in December 1972 with his guidance, advice, and care. Dr. Webb went to Mexico for field work [in the summers], and he graciously took me along [on a trip] 1,000 miles south of the US border. The tadpole specimens obtained were the basis for my thesis, and a subsequent peer-reviewed publication [Korky and Webb 1973]. Keeping up with him in the field was an effort, as he worked day and night chasing amphibians and reptiles. We camped out, cooked out, and wrote field notes, and curated specimens [in the] evenings. He nurtured my scientific curiosity, ‘showed me the ropes,’ and had a fine sense of humor. He was a very fine educator and researcher, I am forever indebted to him, and feel privileged he was my adviser” (J. Korky, pers. comm., February 2019).



FIG. 8. Robert G. Webb in 1978 with a turtle trap in the Rio Grande, S. Sierra Blanca, Hudspeth County, Texas.

Travis LaDuc described multiple aspects of Bob's demeanor and personality. In response to a question, "he would pause, scrunch up his face and simultaneously shrug his shoulders to his ears while saying, 'well...I don't know much about that but...'" and then he would go into fine detail about a given publication directly related to your question, the range of years it was probably published, and a personal anecdote about the author or his experience with the taxon in question. Sometimes he'd include something completely random in his story such as, 'you know he liked Mexican food' or 'that guy really liked college basketball.' During my tenure as a grad student, he would be working behind a dissecting scope five or six mornings a week. Usually with his transistor radio softly playing jazz in the background. If you listened long enough, or if he forgot you were in the room, sometimes you'd hear him talking to himself (and sometimes not talking to himself politely either!). Dr. Webb was incredibly humble about his science and contributions to herpetology, usually deflecting attention towards others he felt more deserving of accolades. He was a marvelous teacher, both in the classroom and in the field. The world is a better place having had Dr. Robert G. Webb in it. And I'm certainly a better person for having known him" (T. LaDuc, pers. comm., March 2019).

Remarkably, the vast majority of Bob's publications are single-authored (see his complete bibliography on website provided below). His first peer-reviewed paper was a range extension for the Chicken Turtle (*Deirochelys reticularia*) in Oklahoma (Webb 1950), and he continued publishing with few interruptions until 2014, when he coauthored an account of the Indian Flapshell Turtle (*Lissemys punctata*) for the book *Conservation Biology of Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises* (Bhupathy et al. 2014). Included in his impressive six-decade publication record, Bob described one salamander (*Ambystoma silvense*), three frogs (*Eleutherodactylus saxatilis*, *Rana pylonota*, and *R. zweifeli*), and 11 valid species of reptiles, including three turtles (*Sternotherus depressus*, Fig. 5; *Pelochelys signifera*, and *Trachemys yaquia*), one kingsnake (*Lampropeltis greeri*, Fig. 6), and seven lizards (*Crotaphytus antiquus*, *Emoia rufilabialis*, *E. taumakoensis*, *Lepidophyma tarascae*, *Sceloporus insignis*, *Xantusia bolsonae*, and *X. extorris*) (Frost 2019; Uetz et al. 2019). He also named one subspecies of Indian Flapshell Turtle (genus *Lissemys*) and four subspecies in the genus *Apalone*, but molecular phylogenetic



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. HANSEN

FIG. 9. *Lampropeltis webbi* was described by Bryson et al. (2005) in honor of Robert Webb's extensive contributions to Mexican herpetology, particularly his work in the Sierra Madre Occidental. The type specimen and paratype were both found as road kills, and it was not until Fall 2005 that a living example of this species was obtained by the HERP.MX team in the Durango–Sinaloa border region.

analyses that included these taxa suggested they do not warrant recognition as valid species (McGaugh et al. 2008; Prasczag et al. 2011; van Dijk 2011; Turtle Taxonomy Working Group 2017). On occasion, he illustrated the species he encountered, and the June 1991 cover of *Southwestern Naturalist* featured an illustration of *Bogertophis subocularis* that was drawn by Bob and his wife Patricia, who he married in his late 50s (Fig. 7).

While working on *Lissemys*, Bob corresponded by mail with Roger Bour, who would eventually become curator of the turtles and tortoises collection at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle in Paris. Bour recalled his impressive command of the taxonomic literature. "For me he will be the great 'softshells' man' forever. I remember that he was immediately confident with me, although he was already a professor, but I was not yet even appointed. He sent me a draft of his work. I suggested a specimen (collected by Alain Dubois) to make a holotype for his new *Lissemys punctata andersoni*; the final paper was published in France [Webb 1980] and as editor I dared to slightly enhance his sketch of the Lacepède *Testudo punctata* (with his agreement, of course). Several years later he asked about a catalogue of the MNHN type specimens of softshell turtles—actually he knew virtually all of them. I wrote one, with Alain Dubois's help, and we included him as co-author [Bour et al. 1995]" (R. Bour, pers. comm., February 2019).

Other colleagues had similar praise. John Iverson remarked, "Bob was a wonderful and valued colleague of mine since the 1970s when I first met him at the annual herp meetings. He was always generous with his time and information, even when I was a lowly grad student. I always looked forward to seeing him at the meetings, and our shared time talking about turtles was greatly appreciated. He and Henry Fitch and Hobart Smith were my earliest mentors. Perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned from him was the importance of starting your systematic studies by examining the type specimens, an approach that is, unfortunately, increasingly rare today" (J. Iverson, pers. comm., March 2019). Peter Meylan recalled, "When I started working on softshell turtles in 1981, Bob Webb was the trionychid guru of North America. I made extensive use of his review of the North American forms and other papers on softshells of

which there were already more than a dozen by the mid 80s. I had first met him with his sidekick, Ralph Axtell, at UF in 1977 during ASIH meetings. From the beginning he was very supportive of my work on softshells, although he did not always agree with my taxonomic conclusions. We maintained an active correspondence through 1990. He provided the most complete feedback of any of the readers of my dissertation and his comments greatly improved the published version. It was in that correspondence that he suggested that we work together on a paper to resurrect *Rafetus swinhoi* [Meylan and Webb 1988], which at that time was buried in the synonymy of *Pelodiscus sinensis*. I enjoyed working with Bob who should be recognized as a major contributor to the understanding of the family Trionychidae” (P. Meylan, pers. comm., March 2019).

Most of Bob's work focused on northern Mexico and the US-Mexico border region (Fig. 8), but he did some fieldwork in other areas of the world, and published several papers on amphibians and reptiles from several different continents. Along with several collaborators, Bob published studies on the herpetofauna of Chile and Korea (Webb et al. 1962; Webb and Greer 1969). Over the course of two decades, he clarified the systematics of African *Cyclanorbis*, Chinese *Pelodiscus*, and Papuan *Pelochelys* softshell turtles (Webb 1975, 1985, 1995). He published a series of four papers with Korky on the biology and conservation of two frogs, *Rana temporaria* and *Epidalea calamita*, in Ireland (Korke and Webb 1993, 1996, 1999, 2001). Colleague Anders Rhodin recalled, “I worked with Bob on the softshell turtles of New Guinea and also traveled with him to Roti and Sumba in Indonesia in search of other turtles. He was one of the very best morphology-based softshell turtle taxonomists of our times and his expertise and contributions to the field will be sorely missed” (A. Rhodin, pers. comm., February 2019).

In 2005, Robert W. Bryson Jr., David Lazcano, and James R. Dixon, a long-time colleague, honored Bob by naming a spectacular new species of kingsnake (*Lampropeltis webbi*, Fig. 9) for him (Bryson et al. 2005). In the latter years of his time at UTEP, Bob corresponded extensively with fellow herpetologists and friends, including Hobart M. Smith, Ernie Liner, and Ralph Axtell. Affectionately known as “Bobbie scale” by some UTEP colleagues for his interest in scaly reptiles, Bob was shy and often “talked to the chalkboard” while delivering lectures for his classes. He was an enthusiastic fan of the university's basketball and football teams, and he attended games with friends and colleagues regularly. As recalled by his friend, former Master's student, and fellow UTEP professor Jerry Johnson, “we had season ticket seats together from 1977 until 2016 or so for UTEP football and basketball games. Bob could play the piano quite well and really liked jazz, especially Dixieland; we were members of the El Paso Friends of Jazz and regularly attended their meetings (mostly listening to music). Bob and I went on numerous field trips together during the 1970s, 80s, 90s, up until about 2012 or so. We went all over the [southwestern] US and also took trips to Colorado, Utah, Kansas, Illinois, Missouri, and Michigan, and of course went several times to Mexico, including at least twice to Playa Azul with Baker; also to Oaxaca, Chiapas, Veracruz, Durango, Sinaloa, and other places. We spent the nights on trips with people like R. H. Baker, E. H. Taylor, R. Axtell, and D. Tinkle” (J. Johnson, pers. comm., March 2019).

Bob was working on a massive project about the amphibians and reptiles of Durango, the Mexican state where he had spent

the lion's share of his time, before declining health ended his research activities. He will be missed by family, friends, and colleagues. For a complete list of Bob's publications, please visit:

<https://www.utep.edu/biodiversity/RobertWebb/RobertGWebbProfile.html>

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