

A tribute to John Gilhen 1941–2025

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The death of Dr. (*honoris causa*) John Gilhen (Figure 1) from heart failure on 6 April 2025, aged 83, ended a chapter in the history of Canadian Maritime herpetology. John was the last of a small group of mid-late 20th century Canadian Maritime herpetologists that included Sherman Bleakney, Francis Cook, and Stanley Gorham (see Cook 1991; Brunton *et al.* 2020; Daborn 2021). This was a cohort that bridged a late 19th–early 20th century Canadian herpetology focussed largely on inventory (Cook 2007a), with studies of descriptive biogeography and morphology. These investigations have in turn graded into the more varied, hypothesis-driven studies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Wake 2008)—which now routinely draw on molecular genetics, behavioural analyses, satellite tracking technologies, and methods in toxicology and pathology to study (and conserve) Canadian amphibians and reptiles (see Green 1997; Seburn and Bishop 2007).

John Augustus Paul Gilhen was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on 1 October 1941, the fifth of eight children of Augustus and Flora (*nee* Livingston) Gilhen (Figure 2a). His father trained as a shipwright and was a Lieutenant Commander in the Canadian navy. His mother, with eight children at home and a husband frequently away at sea, was a stay-at-home mother. Always a keen student of Nova Scotia's woods and streams, John was apparently indifferent to the classroom, prompting his father to suggest that he pursue a trade. After completing grade eight, and an abortive attempt at grade nine, John was shunted off to the Halifax Vocational School, where he secured a plumbers certificate (apparently hating every minute of his training; Mintz 2003). Thankfully, his career in the plumbing trade was short-lived—a mere six months—before he secured a position at the Nova



FIGURE 1. Dr. John Gilhen (1941–2025), in the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History gallery in 2013, peers through the jaws of a White Shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*; NSM 88358) which drowned in a weir near Economy, Nova Scotia, on 17 August 2011. John accidentally cut himself during preparation of the specimen, developed a blood infection, and spent a week in hospital recovering. Although best known for his herpetological work, John also contributed significantly to knowledge of Nova Scotia fishes. Photo: Albert Lee.

Scotia Museum (NSM; since 1993 the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History: NSMNH). His father was not pleased, but his mother intervened, “this is what he wants to do in life, leave him alone” (Mintz

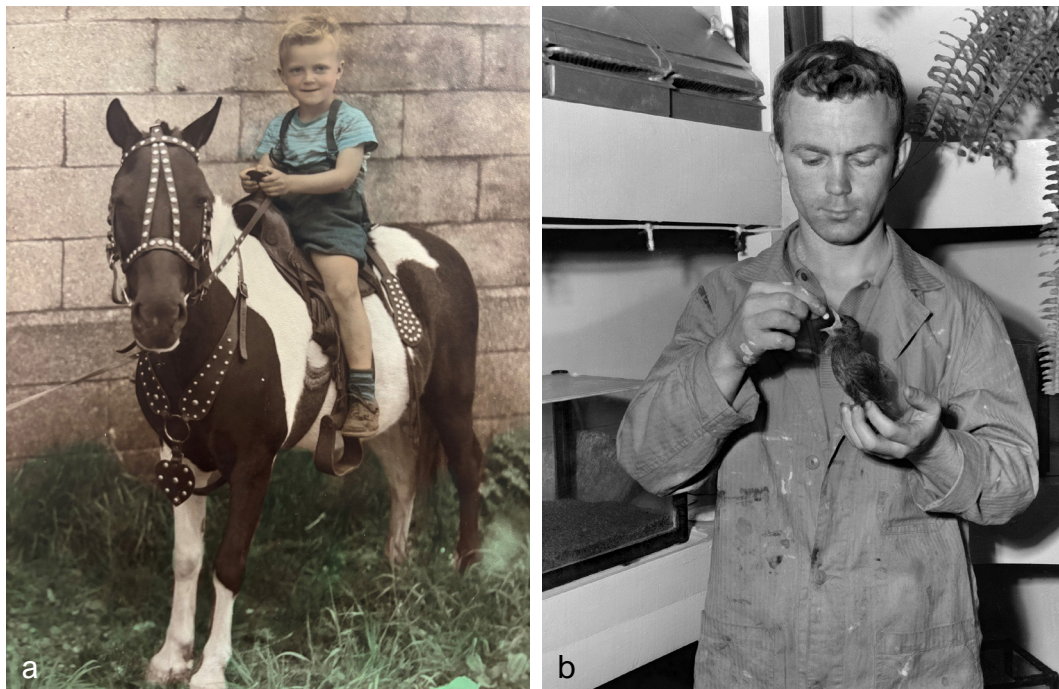


FIGURE 2. a. John Gilhen, the future ichthyologist-herpetologist, about age seven. b. John Gilhen feeding a juvenile Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) in 1963, the year he joined the Nova Scotia Museum as an aquarist and animal care technician. Photo a: unknown. Photo b: unknown/Nova Scotia Museum.

2003: 12). It was 1963, John was 21, and he soon discovered that his weekly salary had dropped from \$65 to \$35 per week (Mintz 2003).

John's initial duties at the NSM revolved around the care of displays of native and exotic wildlife (Figure 2b), tasks he had pursued previously as an adolescent volunteer at the Museum (1952–1955) under the tutelage of NSM Aquarist Professor Victor Paskevicki (1892–1958). It was during John's time as a volunteer that a Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) housed at the Museum was christened "Gus", after its young caretaker, John Augustus. John and Gus would go on to become perhaps the two best-known personalities at the NSMNH, although Gus would out-live John. At an estimated age of 103, Gus continues to thrive.

John's new role required that he collect freshwater and marine species for public display, and he soon became certified in the emerging skill of SCUBA diving. John's earlier volunteer work at the NSM had not gone unnoticed by entomologist J. Lynton Martin (1922–2015), who at the time was in charge of NSM natural history collections. Martin left the NSM in 1955, but returned as Director in 1965, remaining until 1983. With Martin's return, John was appointed Curatorial Assistant in Zoology and wasted no time in

demonstrating his ability and ambition, publishing his first papers in ichthyology and herpetology within the year (Gilhen 1966a,c,d; Taschereau and Gilhen 1966). Several of John's earliest papers (Gilhen 1966b,c, 1967a) were published in the *Educational Journal (Nova Scotia)*, of which Martin was a Board member, and were later issued as educational pamphlets by the NSM (see Bibliography). Martin recognized the potential in John, both as a natural historian and a public educator, offering his encouragement and support, and even helping to illustrate one of John's early papers (Gilhen 1967a). Furthermore, Martin shared with John a keen interest in Nova Scotia amphibians and reptiles (Martin 1954, 1955a,b, 1969).

In 1966 John married Carolyn (Jane) White, a Secretary with the Nova Scotia Public Works Department, and by 1969 was the father of two daughters, Sherry and Dawn. But in September 1973 John's life was tragically up-ended when Jane died on route to the hospital during an asthma attack. John, age 31, was suddenly a single parent with two dependent children, ages four and six. John was in a difficult spot. Museum salaries, especially at the provincial and municipal level, have always been modest, and child-care options in Nova Scotia were limited at the time (Cleveland 2022). Jane's parents stepped in, and the

two girls went to live with them in Prospect Village, a small coastal community about 22 km southwest of Halifax. With Jane's death, John had also lost a significant supporter of his early career in natural history; it was Jane who typed the "numerous drafts" of *The Fishes of Nova Scotia's Lakes and Streams*, published a year later (Gilhen 1974c). John buried himself in his work at the NSM and saw little of his daughters until October 1975 when, with his marriage to Gail Swetnam, the family was reunited. In 1977, a son, Jonathan, was born. The union would eventually founder, to be followed by marriage to Karen Chambers, a museum colleague, when John was in his mid-50s. Although Karen was an enthusiastic field companion and typed many of John's manuscripts during this period, the marriage was short-lived.

A life-long Haligonian, John focussed his amphibian and reptile studies exclusively on Nova Scotia species. This culminated in his 1984 volume *Amphibians and Reptiles of Nova Scotia* (Gilhen 1984), superbly illustrated by his museum colleague Frederick Scott, and lauded as "a book suited to a general and professional audience coast to coast" (Bleakney 1985: 463). Wasserzug (1984: 1031) noted that Scott's watercolours ranked "with the best in any North American amphibian and reptile field guide". However, he expressed concern that the "deluge of data" included in the volume ("hundreds of thousands of amphibian eggs and tens of thousands of snake scales counted during the preparation of this book"; Figure 3a) might intimidate the amateur herpetologist.

Nonetheless, *Amphibians and Reptiles of Nova*

Scotia, and the years of observation that preceded it, established the basis for our understanding of Nova Scotia amphibians and reptiles. More than 40 years later the volume remains the definitive work on this fauna. Not surprisingly, MacGregor and Elderkin (2003) state that John's work in the 1970s provides the foundation for understanding of Wood Turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*) in Nova Scotia. Building on this early work, and by 1993 acutely aware of the conservation threats to Wood Turtles in Nova Scotia, John, along with Tom Herman and Neil Meister, established the "Turtle Watch" Committee. Turtle Watch solicited information from the public on Nova Scotia Wood Turtle status and relocated displaced turtles after examination by a veterinarian (Gilhen *et al.* 1994b). Today, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick support the most northerly, and perhaps some of the largest, remaining North American populations of this endangered turtle (Burns 2007; Jones and Wiley 2021). Until his death, John retained a keen interest in the distribution and status of these populations.

Fascinated by colour variants of Nova Scotia amphibians and reptiles, John produced numerous publications on colour anomalies of frogs, salamanders, and snakes (see Bibliography and Figure 3b). Colour anomalies can arise from genetic, developmental, or environmental interactions (Allain *et al.* 2023), with changes in the incidence of colour variants potentially indicative of environmental challenges. This supports the use of amphibians and reptiles as bio-indicators for detecting the influence of contaminants, habitat fragmentation, or other disruptions

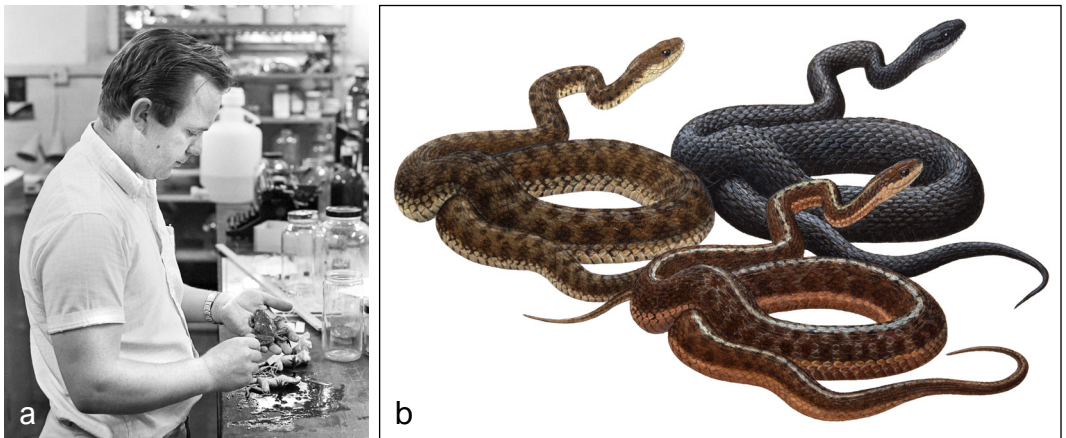


FIGURE 3. a. John Gilhen in the Nova Scotia Museum in June 1969 examining a series of frogs, data from which would eventually appear in his 1984 book, *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Nova Scotia*. b. Original artwork by Frederick W. Scott depicting three colour phases of Maritime Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis pallidula*), one element among the central plates and poster for the *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Nova Scotia*. The illustration reflects John Gilhen's long-standing interest in colour morphs and colour anomalies in Nova Scotia amphibians and reptiles. Photo a: Ron Merrick/Nova Scotia Museum. Photo b: Courtesy Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History.

to the environment (Marushchak *et al.* 2021). At a time when researchers are under pressure to publish immediately relevant information, John had the foresight to urge the collection of such apparently disparate observations. He recognized that over time such information could contribute to an understanding of how urban development, together with Nova Scotia's unique peninsular geography, could combine to increase the incidence of colour anomalies in a provincial herpetofauna of increasingly fragmented populations (Gilhen 1999b; Gilhen *et al.* 2012).

Early in his career John presented his research on the Blue Spotted Salamander (*Ambystoma laterale*) complex at the annual meeting of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (probably at the urging of Francis Cook, at the time, Head of the Herpetology Unit at the National Museum of Canada [now the Canadian Museum of Nature]), held in Ottawa (Gilhen 1974a,b). However, with this exception, John's attendance at scientific conferences during his working career was limited to local meetings (Figure 4). Provincial government restrictions on travel, a lack of recognition for museum-based natural historians by senior government administrators, and John's lack of graduate-level university training,

probably all contributed to this. This, unfortunately, limited his networking opportunities with other herpetologists, especially outside eastern Canada. Nonetheless, in retirement he did make invited trips to Germany to present on Nova Scotia amphibians and reptiles at the annual conference of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Herpetologie und Terrarienkunde (German Society of Herpetology and Terrarium Science; Anonymous 2002; Gilhen 2006; Figure 5).

As a member (1990–1993) of Canada's National Task Force on Declining Amphibian Populations, John joined the forefront of a global effort to understand the loss of amphibian populations (Gilhen 1991). As well, he contributed to federal species recovery teams for Blanding's Turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*; Herman *et al.* 2003) and Northern Ribbon Snake (*Thamnophis saurita*; Elderkin *et al.* 2012), and the provincial Nova Scotia Wood Turtle Management Team (MacGregor and Elderkin 2003). Despite the competing demands of John's circumstances as a practicing herpetologist with broad duties across zoology in an under-resourced provincial museum, in September 2010 John received the Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Network's Blue Racer Award for his contributions to the conservation of Canada's



FIGURE 4. A chorus of herpetologists on a field excursion at the 2001 annual meeting of the Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Network, held in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, 18–22 October. This was one of a limited number of scientific conferences John was able to attend during his working career. Left to right: Dr. Francis Cook, Dr. Fred Schueler, Dr. Sherman Bleakney, John Gilhen, and Dr. Donald McAlpine. Photo: unknown/New Brunswick Museum.

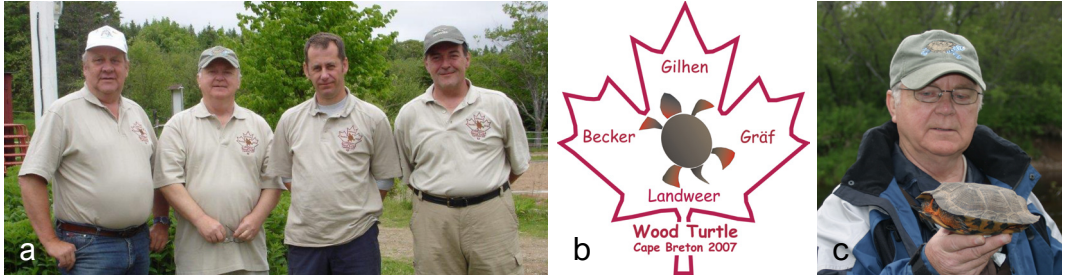


FIGURE 5. John developed a close relationship with several members of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Herpetologie und Terrarienkunde (DGHT), who made multiple trips to Nova Scotia from 1998 to 2007 to study turtles. a. An 18–22 June 2007 trip to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, to collect Wood Turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*) data with members of the DGHT. Left to right: Urs Landweer, John Gilhen, Andreas Gräef, and Herbert Becker. b. The group had shirts produced with a logo to mark the 2007 trip. c. John Gilhen and Wood Turtle near Lamey Stream, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, 18 June 2007 during the 2007 DGHT trip. Photo a: unknown. Photo b: Andreas Gräef. Photo c: Herbert Becker.

amphibians and reptiles. By then John was acknowledged as a “leading Canadian herpetologist” (Cook 2007b: 440). In 1980 he had joined the National Task Force on Standards in Ichthyology and Herpetology, chaired by Royal Ontario Museum Ichthyologist and Curator Dr. Ed Crossman, but as early as the 1970s John’s reputation in herpetology was well-established nationally. In 1971 Francis Cook asked John to oversee the work of a young Ontario herpetologist, Wayne Weller, as he embarked on Blanding’s Turtle research in Kejimikujik National Park, in central Nova Scotia (Weller 1975). This work initiated a litany of studies on the population extending five decades and involving dozens of researchers, many of whom were influenced directly or indirectly by John.

John’s prowess in the field was legendary; it grew out of his remarkable observational skills, curiosity, patience, and his uncanny ability to get inside the mind of whichever species was his focus. This was evident in a recent narrative shared by provincial wildlife biologist Terry Power (pers. comm. to T.B.H.):

I had found a strikingly beautiful erythristic garter snake [*Thamnophis sirtalis*] while doing surveys in an old clear-cut at St. Esprit, Cape Breton Island. When I reported this to John, his interest spiked immediately and plans for a field excursion were hatched. On his arrival from Halifax, and despite my concerns that too much time had elapsed since my initial observations, we set off for the forest where the snake had been seen. Once parked, John went to the trunk of his car and with a flourish pulled out a jar containing two locally sourced live frogs that he had collected the previous evening. He pithed one, tied six feet of string around its waist and secured it in the pocket of his field vest. Once we arrived at the precise spot where I had previously sighted the snake,

John retrieved the tethered carcass from his vest and, like some conjurer of old, worked the tempting, stringed frog with quiet deliberation, hopping and bobbing through the vegetation. To my amazement, several erythristic snakes appeared. And quick as a blink John grabbed one!

Although perhaps best known as a herpetologist, John was also an accomplished ichthyologist. Indeed, about 40% of John’s 90 titles deal with the marine and freshwater fishes of Nova Scotia. Although now out of print, his publication *The Fishes of Nova Scotia’s Lakes and Streams* (Gilhen 1974c) remains one of the few guides to Nova Scotia freshwater fishes. John was particularly interested in Atlantic Whitefish (*Coregonus huntsmani*), the only endemic fish species in Nova Scotia. John co-authored several reports on this species (Gilhen *et al.* 1980; Edge and Gilhen 2000, 2001), which is now Endangered (SARA Public Registry 2025), and restricted to the Petite Rivière watershed; he also co-chaired the federal–provincial Atlantic Whitefish Conservation and Recovery Team. Not afraid to swim against the current, as early as the 1970s John was an outspoken advocate for all Nova Scotia’s freshwater fish species, recognizing the ecological value of the lowly Brown Bullhead (*Ameiurus nebulosus*), White Sucker (*Catostomus commersonii*), and Yellow Perch (*Perca flavescens*), at that time so-called ‘trash fish’. Ahead of his time, he objected to provincial government approaches to wildlife management that saw wetlands poisoned with rotenone in favour of game fish, both native and exotic, and “stream enhancement” programs that altered habitat at the expense of native freshwater non-game fishes.

John’s investigations of marine fishes serve as an important index of warming seas and the now accelerating northward shift of marine species that accompany climate change. Many of his papers provide

the first Nova Scotian, and in some cases Canadian, records of otherwise southern species. John's ability to secure the confidence and respect of Nova Scotia fishermen was crucial to obtaining the specimens that supported these additions to the ichthyofauna. This work was enhanced by collaborations with National Museum of Canada ichthyologists Drs. Charles Gruchy and Don McAllister and later Dr. Brian Coad. John's regular attendance and presentations (jointly with zoologist Andrew Hebda) at the annual meeting of the Halifax-based Fishermen and Scientists Research Society (established 1994) also helped cement his reputation as an approachable, publicly-accessible, scientist.

John retired in 1994, having finally been promoted to Assistant Curator of Zoology the previous year. He was only 52—but that long-sought promotion came at a price. It was offered in conjunction with an early-retirement package aimed at reducing staffing numbers across the provincial government. Complicating matters for the NSMNH, upon retirement the employee position in question was permanently eliminated. Other NSMNH natural history staff also accepted the package, with the result the Museum was to be left with zero zoological expertise. John agreed to stay on for a year while a transition plan was formulated. In 1995 Andrew Hebda joined the NSMNH as Curator of Zoology. However, whereas the NSMNH previously had a compliment of four paid zoologists, it was now reduced to one.

When Nova Scotia Museum Director Lynton Martin retired in 1983, John lost one of his greatest supporters. The misguided view that peer-reviewed publishing (and promotion) was the sole purview of the professional (i.e., university-trained) museum worker came to dominate the NSM workplace. John had a plumber's certificate. This attitude stymied John's publishing opportunities, and frustrated his hopes for promotion. This is reflected in John's reduced output after 1984, following the publication of the *Amphibians and Reptiles of Nova Scotia*. But no one should have underestimated John's commitment to the NSM collections or to natural history studies. When John joined the NSM in 1963 the fish and herpetological collections were modest in size, 917 lots of fishes and 461 lots (likely <1000 specimens) of amphibians and reptiles. By 1993, just prior to John's retirement, the NSMNH amphibian and reptile collection had expanded to 3200 specimens, making it at the time the fourth largest among 16 Canadian herpetological collections (Cook 2007a). By the end of John's tenure in 2020 the collections stood at 6809 catalogued lots of fishes and 1056 catalogued lots of amphibians and reptiles, increases of nearly 650% and 129%, respectively. Furthermore, post-retirement, and with

Hebda's support, John's research productivity was soon back on track. John's retirement years were a productive period for him, with nearly half of his titles produced from 1994 to 2019, with many of these publications appearing in *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* (CFN; Figure 6). In part, this was a reflection of John's great admiration for long-time CFN Editor Francis Cook and the decades of encouragement he provided for John's herpetological activities.

After retirement, the rhythm of John's life was largely unchanged. He continued to travel each day to the NSMNH, first from his Halifax apartment (where he maintained his large collection of antique glass bottles and insulators; see Gilhen 1976 and Somers 2018) and later from his daughter Sherry's home, where he moved into an 'in-law' suite in 2018. At the Museum he responded to public enquiries about fish, amphibians, and reptiles, added specimens to the NSMNH collections, and continued to collaborate on various projects and publications. His desire to contribute to research collections was insatiable. When lack of space at the NSMNH prevented further collection, he shrugged it off and sent his specimens to



FIGURE 6. A striking *Canadian Field-Naturalist* journal cover showing an amelanistic Red-backed Salamander (*Plethodon cinereus*). John contributed manuscripts to 25 issues across 22 volumes of *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*. This is one of eight covers that featured a John Gilhen publication. Photo: D.F. McAlpine/New Brunswick Museum.

the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. Always a meticulous note keeper, he worked diligently organizing his three decades of field notes. Through his private consultancy, John Gilhen Biological Services, he was also able to supplement his pension with a series of herpetological contracts for larger environmental consulting firms that lacked his specialized expertise.

John was a classical natural historian—a discipline founded on keen observation, a love of biological diversity, and a deep sense of place. Throughout his life he retained the ability to find surprise and joy in nature and he took pleasure in sharing both with the widest of possible audiences. Aware of the need to encourage a new generation of natural historians, John was a frequent participant in NSMNH public education programs, including leading a popular annual spring ‘Salamander Meander’ in Halifax’s Hemlock Ravine Park—for a remarkable 28 years. Although in the throes of retirement, John joined the NSMNH project team for Frogwatch ‘94, an environmental education project that enlisted school and youth groups and the public in monitoring the early seasonal calls of Spring Peeper (*Pseudacris crucifer*). Significantly, observations collected in Nova Scotia by A.H. McKay at the turn of the 20th century has allowed Frogwatch data to be interpreted in the light of climate change and its effect on amphibian populations. The project received national attention, engaged with more than 1000 participants, and received a Nova Scotia Environmental Assessment Board Award (Browne 1994; Mahar 1995). John’s decades as a public museum educator did not go unrecognized—in 1985 he was awarded a Halifax Metro Green Scene Certificate in appreciation of his efforts on behalf of the local environment and in 2000 he received the inaugural Halifax Rotary Club Gold Wheel Award for Science and Technology, the latter highlighting individuals making a positive impact on society through their work in the sciences, especially through public service. In 1997 the Museum appointed John a Research Associate and in 2002 granted him Curator Emeritus status, both as these NSMNH recognition programs were rolled out for the first time.

In ‘retirement’ John was often at work seven days a week (invariably putting in a full work day), until 13 March 2020, when a global pandemic closed Nova Scotia’s museums and art galleries (Government of Nova Scotia 2020). It was about this time that John was diagnosed with a generalized form of dementia. In spite of this, John retained much of the detail related to his work at the NSMNH and until the end of his life he maintained a keen interest in fishes, frogs, salamanders, and all things natural history. In November 2010 Acadia University awarded John Gilhen,

the would-be plumber, a Doctor of Science degree, fitting recognition for a lifetime devoted to a better understanding of Nova Scotia’s fishes, amphibians, and reptiles. And John would be pleased to know that Acadia University has established the Dr. John Gilhen Student Memorial Award in Biology, to support an honours summer research student with an interest in conserving native Nova Scotia species.

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF COMMENT: John's last three publications in *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* (CFN) were in the first of two Special Issues honouring Francis Cook (Gilhen and Power 2018; McAlpine and Gilhen 2018; Power and Gilhen 2018). The manuscript for which he was the first author arrived, typed on paper, on 1 December 2017. An electronic version, on a CD, was included in the envelope. Fittingly, it and another were the first two of the 21 manuscripts in the double special issue. I treasure that paper copy submission! And John's work (Gilhen 1984) continues to be cited. See the article in this issue of CFN: Christiansen, J.J.A., G.A. Christie, K.E. Moore, I.M. Acker, M.J. Williams, D.F. McAlpine, G.F.M. Jongsma, and J.L. Riley. 2026. Discovery of novel Four-toed Salamander (*Hemidactylum scutatatum*) occurrences in New Brunswick, Canada. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 139(1): 14–17. <https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v139i1.3403>

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