



## The evolution of ASM picnics

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Genoways and Freeman (2001:603) observed that possibly the “most important function of the annual meeting has been the intangible building of esprit de corps among members of the Society ... [which] led to a sense of mammalogical community, joint research among members, promotion of young mammalogists, the championing of conservation issues ... and the building of a financially strong Society ....” One of the social events at our Annual Meeting, “the picnic,” has become a tradition that contributes to this building of friendships, esprit de corps, and the welcoming of younger members into the Society. Each year, the local committee hosting the Annual Meeting contrives to find a venue for this event that gives attendees a taste (sometimes literally) of the place where the meeting is held, and add a bit of fun. But in fact, the picnic is a fairly recent tradition, as traditions go. We queried several long-time attendees of the Annual Meeting to recall their memories of past picnics and other memorable social events.

The first coalesced evening social was at the Asilomar Conference Grounds, Pacific Grove, California (1973) along the beautiful Pacific coast with sea otters foraging off shore. Prior to that, there were no organized evening events at Annual Meetings, except for the banquet. During the evenings at earlier Annual Meetings, attendees often broke up into small groups centered around home university colleagues with little interaction among other attendees. Students felt honored to be invited to participate in these evening gatherings of the senior mammalogists. The first auction occurred at Michigan State University, East Lansing in 1977 where cans of Olde Frothingslosh Pale Stale Ale were auctioned off to raise funds for additional beer purchases (Genoways and Freeman 2001). Olde Frothingslosh, the humorously labeled beer advertised as being so light that it floats on top of the foam, was a specialty item produced by the Pittsburgh Brewing Company. It is now a beer can collector's prized item (for the history of Olde Frothingslosh see [http://hoaxes.org/weblog/comments/olde\\_frothingslosh\\_pale\\_stale\\_ale](http://hoaxes.org/weblog/comments/olde_frothingslosh_pale_stale_ale)). The auction netted \$55, which was used to purchase more beer. Mammalogists dutifully emptied the cans from the

bottom to preserve the look for collectors prior to sale and so that they would be legal to auction. Today, we have organized events with a social component every evening, and the proceeds from the annual auction are provided to the Trustees for investment in the Future Mammalogists' Fund. Beer bottles, t-shirts, and other items with the ASM pronghorn symbol (Timm and McLaren 2019) are popular at the annual auctions, in addition to books, reprints, and all sorts of mammal-themed odds and ends (Fig. 1).

The venues and cuisine of the picnics have varied considerably from one year to the next. One advantage of campus-based meetings, especially including the picnic, is that it gives the local committee an opportunity to show off what is special and different about their region, both in habitat, as well as locally popular foods. ASM picnics often feature excellent regional cuisine. The picnic at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, in 1996 was recalled as being among the most memorable for the combination of aesthetics and great food. We ate spectacular bison (*Bison bison bison*) burgers cooked to perfection while enjoying the beautiful Turtle River State Park (Fig. 2). Background music was provided by a local bluegrass group. The banquet at South Dakota State University, Brookings, in 2008 featured a wonderful bison roast. Experienced mammalogists know that bison is difficult to cook properly because of the lack of intramuscular fat, as opposed to domestic cattle that have had higher fat content bred in over decades for taste, to the detriment of human health. When bison is prepared right, it is enjoyable and memorable and far healthier than beef for those who have cholesterol issues.

Educational experiences with marine environments and seafood were shared by the predominantly landlubbing mammalogists at several Annual Meetings. At the 1979 Oregon State University picnic in Corvallis, we cracked open Dungeness crabs while sitting on rocks above the Pacific Ocean (Fig. 3). They were so good that one attendee was accused of nearly eating her weight in crabs. At the University of Rhode Island, Kingston in 1980, when one of the experienced general zoology



**Fig. 1.**—This image from the 1994 meeting t-shirt shows an original label from the beer called Old Pronghorn, a “special brew” by the local Old Dominion Brewery for the 75th Anniversary Meeting of the American Society of Mammalogists in Washington, D.C. In order to have a specialty label applied to the bottles, the local committee had to purchase 200 cases of beer. This supply came in handy at the National Zoo when folks stood in long lines waiting to get to the barbecue. Cleverly, the label, featuring a pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), also was silk-screened onto the sleeve of the meeting t-shirt. Photograph courtesy of John R. Wible, Carnegie Museum of Natural History.



**Fig. 2.**—The scenic Turtle River State Park west of Grand Forks, North Dakota, site of the 1996 ASM picnic. The historic pavilion where the picnic was held was built by the CCC in the early 1930s. The park is a lovely riparian woodland located on a prominent beach ridge of Glacial Lake Agassiz. The Turtle River drains the surrounding land and flows into the Red River of the North, which ultimately empties into Hudson Bay. Photograph courtesy of Robert W. Seabloom, University of North Dakota.



**Fig. 3.**—View of the beach and Pacific Ocean at Beverly Beach State Park along the Oregon coast just west of Corvallis, site of the 1979 picnic hosted by Oregon State University. Photograph courtesy of Matt Noble, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, Salem.

teachers among us saw a beautiful, complete lobster on her plate, she immediately, and without thinking, automatically determined the sex of her lobster. When she realized what she had done, she stepped aside and watched as others came through the line. Sure enough, every zoology teacher in the bunch automatically determined the sex of their lobster before diving in. Another experienced zoologist (who was also a native New Englander) offered to assist landlubbers in the fine art of disassembling and eating lobsters for the low, low price of just one lobster claw. She ate well that evening. However, it was the bivalves, apparently, that were especially memorable that year in that their bacterial count kept a fair number of mammalogists up half the night. Annual Meetings along the East Coast often featured a clambake-type picnic (University of Rhode Island, 1980; University of Maine, 1985). Known as the New England clambake, a traditional method of cooking seafood, such as lobsters, crabs, and clams and other bivalves, is by steaming the ingredients in pits, covered by layers of seaweed. The shellfish can be accompanied by vegetables, such as onions, carrots, and corn on the cob. Clambakes are festive occasions along the coast of New England.

At the University of Alaska, Fairbanks in 1989, a spectacular salmon was on the menu and served to a few attendees. Unbeknownst to many at the gathering however, the caterer dropped a full tray of salmon in the sand as he was carrying it to the outside grill and the entire batch was unsalvageable. They hurriedly grilled up a far less expensive, less flavorful, bony whitefish and it was served to the remaining attendees. The ever-resourceful local committee quickly increased the output of beer, hoping that picnickers wouldn't notice the substitution, and seemingly none did. Mammalogists clearly know their mammals better than their marine life. However, efforts by the local committee to be reimbursed for what was clearly the caterer's mistake were unsuccessful.

The picnic in 2011 at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon featured local foods prepared in the traditional method by members of the indigenous Yakama Nation. The salmon, cooked over an open grill, was spectacular. The picnic at the

University of Idaho in 2017 was unique in that the food was provided by the University's test farm. Recipes using locally grown lentils were a first for our Annual Meeting and were excellent. Legumes are one of the signature crops of the area. Two different lentil dishes were served at the picnic—barbecue baked lentils, which is commonly served at outdoor venues such as picnics, and lentil tabbouleh, a salad-like lentil dish that is a common side dish. For many, the meeting at Idaho was their first exposure to the Palouse Prairie, a beautiful and endangered vegetation type unique to this distinct geographic region, encompassing parts of north-central Idaho and south-eastern Washington (Fig. 4).

The venues of many picnics have provided unique educational experiences in themselves. At the Humboldt State University meetings in both 1984 and 2004, the picnic was located in the beautiful northern California redwoods at Camp Bauer. Memorable picnics have been hosted at zoos on several occasions, including the Rio Grande Zoo in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1987 and twice at the National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C. (the 75th Annual Meeting in 1994 and the 100th Annual Meeting in 2019). We learned how to break dance at the National Zoo in 1994, as it was being considered for an Olympic event at the time. Two picnics were hosted on paddlewheel boats cruising up and down scenic rivers—the first being at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio in 1981 and the second at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, in 1989 on the lovely Chena River. A former Mormon temple came to our rescue in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1992 when the wrath of the heavens poured forth a torrential rain. The picnic had to be moved from an outdoor arboretum to the old Mormon temple locally known as the 19th Ward House of Worship, but now owned by the city. Somewhat ironically given the history of this venue, the very organized local committee had plenty of beer, barbecue, and good music for dancing. Other memorable venues include asphalt parking lots in the middle of town. The first parking lot picnic was at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, in 2003—albeit we do give the local hosts credit for selecting

a parking lot adjacent to the Hub City Brewery and the Cactus Theatre, where fun musical entertainment featured the cover music of West Texas favorites Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, and Jerry Lee Lewis. The Host Resolution for the meetings provides a quip, “only a West Texan would think that a parking lot was a proper place for a picnic” (*Journal of Mammalogy* 84:1487). Also memorable was the selection of the parking lot of a Bass Pro Shops in Springfield, Missouri in 2005, hosted by Southwest Missouri State University (Fig. 5). The impressive taxidermy mounts inside the store stimulated several of our members to spontaneously provide interesting on-the-spot lectures about the various species after the food and drink had been consumed outside.

In Laramie, Wyoming in 2010, we gathered at the Wyoming Territorial Prison State Historic Site where the infamous Butch Cassidy had been held—a prison venue for a picnic caused some bemusement and seemed fitting. While some picnic locations tend to serve merely as an outdoor background for socializing, the Territorial Prison boasts one of the oldest buildings in Wyoming. Curious mammalogists and history buffs enjoyed exploring this interesting site both before and after the meal. Offsite picnics always provide fun, enriching educational experiences and a great opportunity for interaction with colleagues, but also add to the cost with the need to provide transportation to the venue. The State of Kansas, one of the historical homes of the ASM, has provided interesting weather experiments to test even the hardest field mammalogists. At the 1991 Annual Meeting at Kansas State University, Manhattan, early arrivals watched a tornado cruise overhead within a half mile of us—a first for many attendees who instead of taking shelter in a basement were outside enjoying the experience. The picnic exposed many to a family of arthropods, the Trombiculidae (chiggers), for the first time, but now, decades later, perhaps most attendees remember best the hayrack ride across the open prairie to see the bison grazing as the sun was setting. A thermal tolerance experiment was undertaken during



**Fig. 4.**—The Palouse Prairie-type topography viewed from Kamiak Butte. The site of the 2017 picnic at the University of Idaho, Moscow is situated in this landscape. Much of the original Palouse Prairie is now in agriculture. Less than 1% of it remains in native vegetation, all of which was too rocky to plant. Photograph courtesy of Mark A. Chappell, University of California, Riverside.



**Fig. 5.**—Bass Pro Shops. The 2005 ASM Annual Meeting was hosted by Southwest Missouri State University and the picnic was held in the parking lot of the Bass Pro Shops in Springfield. Photograph courtesy of Sean P. Maher, Missouri State University.

the 2018 K-State picnic at the beautiful Konza Prairie, where the straight ambient air temperature was 46°C (114°F). In 1990, the “Frostburg” State University (Maryland) picnic provided great oysters, shrimp, cheese, and banjo music, but the cold and wind on top of the mountain caused everyone to bolt down their food and get off the mountain as quickly as possible. Texas also has provided interesting weather for our picnics. The 1976 picnic at Texas Tech was held at Palo Duro Canyon. Many remember the power of a West Texas thunderstorm with wind so strong that it blew the foam off the beer and plates off the tables. During a historical reenactment of the founding of Texas by professional actors, most mammalogists were more focused on the bats flying overhead than the professionally produced stage play.

Mammalogists, being good observant naturalists, are always on the lookout for interesting local wildlife during our annual picnics. A lifer for many occurred at the Konza Prairie picnic in 1991 when a local badger (*Taxidea taxus*) refused to concede the trail to a considerable number of mammalogists out for a walk late in the day. When they met head on, he knew it was his territory and these interlopers needed to give him his due. A copperhead (*Agkistrodon contortrix*) tried to claim the beer line at Konza in 2018, but was nearly blinded by the flashes from all of the photographs being taken by the mammalogists. The picnic in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 2013 was held in the Reading Terminal Market near the hotel. The local Norway rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) foraging throughout the venue provided considerable entertainment for the always-observant

mammalogists. A yowling tiger (*Panthera tigris*) serenaded us just after sunset at the National Zoo in 2019. Or maybe he was just telling us it was time to go home.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank R. T. Bowyer, L. N. Carraway, H. H. Genoways, E. J. Heske, T. J. McIntyre, J. L. Rachlow, E. A. Rickart, D. A. and R. L. Schlitter, D. J. Schmidly, and D. E. Wilson for sharing their insights on the rich history of the ASM with us, significantly contributing to the details presented here. [Figure 1](#) was provided courtesy of J. R. Wible, Carnegie Museum of Natural History; [Figure 2](#), courtesy of R. W. Seabloom, University of North Dakota; [Figure 3](#), courtesy of M. Noble, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department; [Figure 4](#), courtesy of M. A. Chappell (University of California, Riverside) and J. L. Rachlow (University of Idaho); [Figure 5](#), courtesy of S. P. Maher, Missouri State University. M. G. Girard and J. R. Wible’s masterful efforts in improving the figures used herein are most appreciated.

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