

## IN MEMORIAM

### **William B. Robertson, Jr., 1924-2000**

Florida ornithology will ever be in debt to Dr. William B. (Bill) Robertson, Jr., who passed away on 28 January 2000 at the age of 75. In many ways and for many decades, he was the acknowledged Dean of Florida ornithologists. In a state that harbored some of the most scientifically and professionally prominent ornithologists of the second half of the twentieth century (Austin, Brodkorb, Owre, Kale, James, Stevenson, Woolfenden, to name a selection), it was he whose engagement, collaboration, encouragement, advice, knowledge and wisdom were sought out by all of the rest. And it was he who inevitably was called into service to advise their students who in turn became an exceptional cadre of Florida-reared ornithologists. His was a wisdom and authority born of his innate intelligence, long experience, care, thoughtfulness, and impeccable judgment. And he knew his Florida birds. It was he whose care and scholarship produced the definitive accurate listing of the birds of Florida.

Bill Robertson's Florida experience began with his doctoral studies, when he was sent to the Everglades by the great name in animal ecology, S. Charles Kendeigh, who was then dispatching his graduate students into the major biomes. Bill's youthful assignment was to study the avifauna of the West Indian zone of South Florida, which he did with a completeness that produced a monumental 1955 doctoral thesis of 613 information-crammed pages, entitled, "Breeding bird populations of tropical Florida in relation to the vegetation." The paper remains the definitive statement of the avian biogeography and habitat relationships of South Florida. Like much of his work, to great misfortune, the dissertation was never published and so was not as accessible to the wider scientific community as otherwise it should have been. Fortunately an opportunity to abstract the core of the work was made available years later and published as "The southern Florida avifauna" in the book "Environments of South Florida: Present and Past." The senior author was fortunate to be taken on as a coauthor charged with updating the information for the paper, an example of Bill's habit of taking junior biologists onto his projects, a trait that benefited many a newbie ornithologist.

As he was working on his dissertation, he also was working for Everglades National Park, where he became the second biologist of the still new and still little-known park. It was from his assignments in this capacity that in 1953 he wrote one of the most important studies ever of South Florida ecology, a report to the National Park Service en-



titled “A survey of the effects of fire in Everglades National Park.” In this paper he demonstrated that much of South Florida’s vegetation is the way it is because of fire, and that managed fire would have to be restored if the ecosystem were to persist. To the government, dominated by its Smokey the Bear philosophy, starting its own forest fires was a new and scary thing, and this report helped create the era of controlled burning in the Federal government that turned back a century of ignorant natural resources management practices. That today any pine-wood at all is left for southern Florida’s birds is due to Bill’s critical study. As was the case with the dissertation, the 169-page report was never published, but that did not keep it from being exceptionally influential within government natural resources management circles.

Toward the end of his first decade in Florida, he wrote what became one of the jewels of Florida natural history literature. Unlike the antecedent works, it was short, pithy, and popularized. This was “Everglades: The Park Story.” In this 1959 booklet, he not only shared his already profound knowledge of what the Everglades is all about but showed a flare for popular writing that could leave professional writers

in his dust. His imagery, word choice, and turn of phrase made every page a joy and every reader a new devotee of the Everglades. No popular book reveals the Everglades nearly so well. Nearly fifty years later this booklet remains in print, a testament to the timeless nature of his writing, and it remains a must-read for every South Florida naturalist.

As the sixties progressed, he was joined by a much larger science and resource management staff in Everglades National Park, populated by a succession of young scientists to whom he became a cherished mentor. He also was burdened increasingly by unending demands for meetings, letter answering, reports, opinion pieces, and other products that can consume a conscientious government scientist, particularly one who took on every assignment in a perfectionist mode. The sixties and the seventies brought more intense environmental challenges, heating up the biopolitics of the Everglades. As saving the remnant pieces of South Florida became a national issue and later a national priority, the agendas of involved government agencies and conservation groups swayed with the wind; and it was he that stood upright in the resulting breezes. He was involved deeply, although quietly, in all the issues of the era—the Jetport and Big Cypress Preserve, Islandia and Biscayne National Monument, Aerojet, SeaDade, Turkey Point, and in Everglades National Park itself the never-ending battles over water management, fire management, endangered species protection and so on. He was not the guy standing up at public hearings for all to see and applaud; he was the one whose insights were being put forth by those who did speak. As the decades sped by, his views continued to be sought, even if not always followed. But he kept on keeping on, doing the best he could in the highly charged political climate, being universally admired by the environmental community, and sometimes frustrating his bosses. Importantly, through all these job-related distractions, he never let go of the core of his life's work, the ornithology of South Florida. He did his studies and inspired others to do theirs.

Bill's South Florida bird studies are too numerous to list, but include: waterbird censuses; Bald Eagles in Florida Bay during their period of range-wide decline and recovery; Ospreys; Great White Herons; Roseate Spoonbills; Christmas Counts; breeding bird surveys; Audubon Field Notes Regional Reports and Changing Seasons summaries, which themselves are classics; rarities, new records, and range changes; and reports of the effects of climatic events on birds, especially hurricane Donna.

But of all his bird studies, there was one true love—the terns breeding on the Dry Tortugas. This island love affair began during a honeymoon visit with his new bride Betty in 1956. His 1964 paper "The terns of the Dry Tortugas," published as a Bulletin of the Florida State Museum, is a classic of history, geography, and ornithology. Annually he organized his Tortugas Trip, and for his teams of volunteers and students

it was an experience of a lifetime. A few lucky ones came to plan their year around the repeating opportunity to be on the Tortugas (despite the seasick trip on the way there), catching birds, taking data, banding, and recovering from the exertions each night with good company and plentiful libation. First with his wife Betty and then with an increasing cadre of colleagues including his great co-conspirator Glen Woolfenden, he studied this colony for decades, come hell or high water. At times it was hell to keep the project going; there are times he did it on his vacation time because his bosses wanted him to stop. But unlike them, he knew that long-term research is so precious that the vicissitudes of the moment cannot be allowed to interfere. And he did it through the high water of a hurricane, through which he was able to document storm effects on the terns. Unraveling the demography of the Sooty Tern was his goal, but he also found out about site fidelity, nesting success, food, and migration. The latter led to what most scientists would consider a career capper, when he published "Trans-Atlantic migration of juvenile Sooty Terns" in the scientific world's most prestigious journal, *Nature*, his finding that Tortugas Sooty Terns crossed the Atlantic.

Also important are the studies that never bore his name, those that he encouraged from his young colleagues and students, studies of herons, ibises, hawks, sparrows, kites, osprey, seabirds, mockingbirds, vultures and many more that comprise the bulk of the literature on South Florida birds of the era. It is hard to recall a South Florida bird study that he did not in some way advise. He invited his young colleagues to analyze his own data and write the papers, on which he might or might not be an author. As a scientist, his professional generosity, selflessness, and encouragement remain nothing short of remarkable in a field not well known for such attributes among its practitioners. Young ornithologists of Florida could have had access to no better a mentor.

His other great life's work, the study of the South Florida avifauna as a whole, saw a completion point when he and Glen Woolfenden completed a pair of papers, "Florida bird species: an annotated list" and "The breeding birds of Florida Part. 1. Sources and post-settlement changes." Both published as special publications by the Florida Ornithological Society, these works by the two great perfectionists of Florida ornithology were the result of a long, deliberative, incisive, error-finding, creative thinking process that produced the definitive baseline studies of Florida's changing avifauna.

In 1971, he was invited to participate in the Second National Biological Congress of the American Institute of Biological Sciences, and his talk, although modestly presented, was the most precise and cutting statement ever of the issues of the Everglades. Never published, the talk bravely entitled, "A quick look at natural history, biogeography, and biopolitics in South Florida" was well circulated in photocopy

and became required reading for Everglades partisans. So well regarded was Bill that he was the only possible choice as the inaugural president of the fledgling Florida Ornithological Society, holding the office in 1973-1974. At the first conference ever of park service biologists in 1976, then-Assistant Secretary of Interior Nathaniel P. Reed surprised him with the U.S. Department of Interior Medal for Distinguished Service. He was a featured speaker at that meeting, before an auditorium full of his admiring Park Service colleagues and protégés.

His other recognitions were many. Joining the American Ornithologists' Union in 1955, he was elected Fellow in 1977 and was also elected a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He received the Award for Excellence from the George M. Wright Society and the Herbert W. Kale II Award of the Florida Chapter of the Wildlife Society. He was selected as an Honorary Member of the Florida Ornithological Society. Posthumously, the Department of the Interior awarded Bill its highest honor, the Citation for Meritorious Service, and Everglades National Park named one of its research stations the Dr. Bill Robertson, Jr. Center. The Florida Ornithological Society honored his contributions by establishing the William B. and Mary J. Robertson Fellowship Award to support the study and conservation of wildlife, habitat, and ecosystems in Florida and the Caribbean. So far, the award has funded study of Brown-Headed Nuthatches in the Bahamas and further study of the Sooty Terns of Dry Tortugas.

Bill Robertson, Jr., was born in Berlin, Illinois, on 22 August 1924. He received his AB degree from Carthage College in 1947 and his MS (1949) and doctorate (1955) from the University of Illinois, Urbana. His interest in birds was early found; he published his first breeding bird census when he was 17 years old. In December of 1997, Dr. William B. Robertson, Jr., retired after an astounding 46 years of federal service. But even in retirement he continued to conduct field work, provide guidance and proceeding with his life's work of Florida birds. And that life's work continues today through the ongoing studies and conservation work of many dozens of his students, former assistants, colleagues, and successors. He was a man of profound reserve, intellect, and deliberation; a man of unbending ethics who was not swayed by the winds of politics and never backed down from saying what he knew to be right; a man to whom his colleagues were his family. Every ornithologist and birder who follows the path he blazed in the ornithology of South Florida can only be grateful that he was who he was and that he did what he did. For a long time coming, Florida ornithology will miss its Dr. Bill.

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