

IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT ALLEN NORRIS

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There were giants [on] the earth in those days...
— Genesis 6:4

Robert Allen Norris (16 December 1922 -- 5 September 2010) was likely the most brilliant ornithologist the state of Georgia has produced. As a youngster, he was one of the early stars of the Georgia Ornithological Society and he went on to attain the highest academic achievements.

Norris was born in Waycross, Georgia; his father worked for the state highway department which meant his family moved often during his childhood. However, most of his early days were spent around the south Georgia towns of Tifton and Fitzgerald. There he met Milton N. Hopkins with whom he shared a love of natural history, especially birds. Another young naturalist, David W. Johnston, met Norris in 1940 and the 3 men became life-long friends. Each were active in the Georgia Ornithological Society (see Johnston and Norris 2007) and served as editor of *The Oriole* at one time or the other in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Norris also fell under the influence and guidance of Herbert L. Stoddard (first president of GOS), and they exchanged visits and attended GOS meetings together.

Norris grew to become an extraordinarily gifted young man, possessing both a prodigious mind and considerable artistic talent. At age 16 he published the first of scores of papers in *The Oriole*; in one, the journal allowed him to present a sample of his field notes and sketches. He published a paper in *Auk* at 18. Norris has 45 papers cited in Thomas D. Burleigh's *Georgia Birds* and most of them appeared in *The Oriole*.

After graduating from Fitzgerald High School, Norris briefly attended Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton before moving on to the University of Georgia (UGA) in 1942. His education was interrupted by 3 years of service in the Navy during World War II; Norris was in the Pacific Theater, and was present off Okinawa during the fierce campaign there in 1945.

Norris resumed his academic career at UGA in 1946 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1948. The next year he earned a Master of

Science degree, also at UGA, having studied under the pioneer ecologist Eugene P. Odum (another past editor of *The Oriole*). Part of Norris' thesis was published as *Distribution and Populations of Summer Birds in Southwestern Georgia*, Occasional Publication Number 3 of GOS. Norris next earned a PhD in 1954 from the University of California at Berkeley under the eminent ornithologists Alden H. Miller and Frank A. Pitelka. Norris investigated the species status of the Brown-headed Nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*) and its western counterpart the Pygmy Nuthatch (*S. pygmaea*), and would waggishly refer to his dissertation as "*A Tale of Two Sittas*." While in California for his studies, Norris also took time to compose the masterful essay "Physiographic & Biogeographic Regions of Georgia with Special Reference to the Distribution of Breeding Birds" for Burleigh's *Georgia Birds*. It is one of his finest accomplishments, a 51-page *tour de force*, thorough and beautifully written.

After teaching one year at Rutgers University in New Jersey, Norris accepted an offer from Eugene Odum in 1955 to work as an ecologist at the Savannah River Plant, an 81,000-ha nuclear research site in South Carolina. There, he surveyed bird distribution and populations in various habitats, especially those of Savannah Sparrows (*Passerculus sandwichensis*); his results were published by the Charleston Museum in 1963. Norris left the Savannah River Plant in 1958, and after briefly teaching at Tulane University and Louisiana State University, he took leave of academia, moved back to California, and worked in a blood bank.

Norris used his work with blood group serology at the blood bank to explore the possibility that avian blood-group antigens could shed light on species or other taxonomic hierarchies in birds. He was able to expand this work when he was hired by Tall Timbers Research Station in 1962 to aid an aging Herbert L. Stoddard in his long-term study of bird casualties at the WCTV tower. The tower kills gave Norris access to blood samples from scores of species, and he published some of his results in 1963 in a bulletin of Tall Timbers. Norris' intuition about using biochemical properties to elucidate avian phylogenies was prescient, but his work was inconclusive. DNA analyses some decades later would revolutionize avian systematics in a way that blood groups could not.

Norris left Tall Timbers in 1966, taking a teaching position at nearby Valdosta State College. For whatever reason, Norris seemed to never have been a good fit on a faculty, always preferring, apparently, field work. At this time, too, he was following his burgeoning interest in botany. He eventually assembled a herbarium of some 10,000 specimens, and having donated it to Georgia Southwestern State University at Americus, he also became its curator.

Although consumed by botany in his later years, Norris never lost his fascination with birds, and continued to submit occasional notes to *The Oriole*. He contributed substantially to several species accounts of the *Life Histories of North American Birds* series and wrote the species account for the Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*). Always he was a quiet, humble man, despite his great abilities and attainments, but was ever open to sharing his knowledge with others. He was preceded in death by his devoted wife Vivian.

A Selected List of Publications by and About R.A. Norris

- Johnston, D.W., and R.A. Norris. 2007. In memoriam: our pal, Buddy Hopkins. *Oriole* 72:4-6.
- Norris, R.A. 1939a. Field notes by Robert Norris. *Oriole* 4:4-7.
- _____. 1939b. Gray Kingbird on St. Simons Island. *Oriole* 4:30.
- _____. 1941. Hooded Warbler flying backwards. *Auk* 58:101.
- _____. 1951. Distribution and populations of summer birds in southeastern Georgia. Occ. Publ. No. 3, Georgia Ornith. Soc.
- _____. 1958a. Physiographic & biogeographic regions of Georgia with special reference to the distribution of breeding birds. In T.D. Burleigh, Georgia birds, Univ. of Oklahoma Press, Norman. p. 25-76.
- _____. 1958b. Comparative biosystematics and life history of the nuthatches *Sitta pygmaea* and *Sitta pusilla*. Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool. 56:119-300.
- _____. 1963a. Birds of the AEC Savannah River Plant Area. Contr. Charleston Mus. XIV.
- _____. 1963b. A preliminary study of avian blood groups with special reference to the Passeriformes. Bull. Tall Timbers Res. Sta. 4:1-71.
- Stoddard, H.L., and R.A. Norris. 1967. Bird casualties at a Leon County, Florida, TV tower. Bull. Tall Timbers Res. Sta. 8:1-104.