

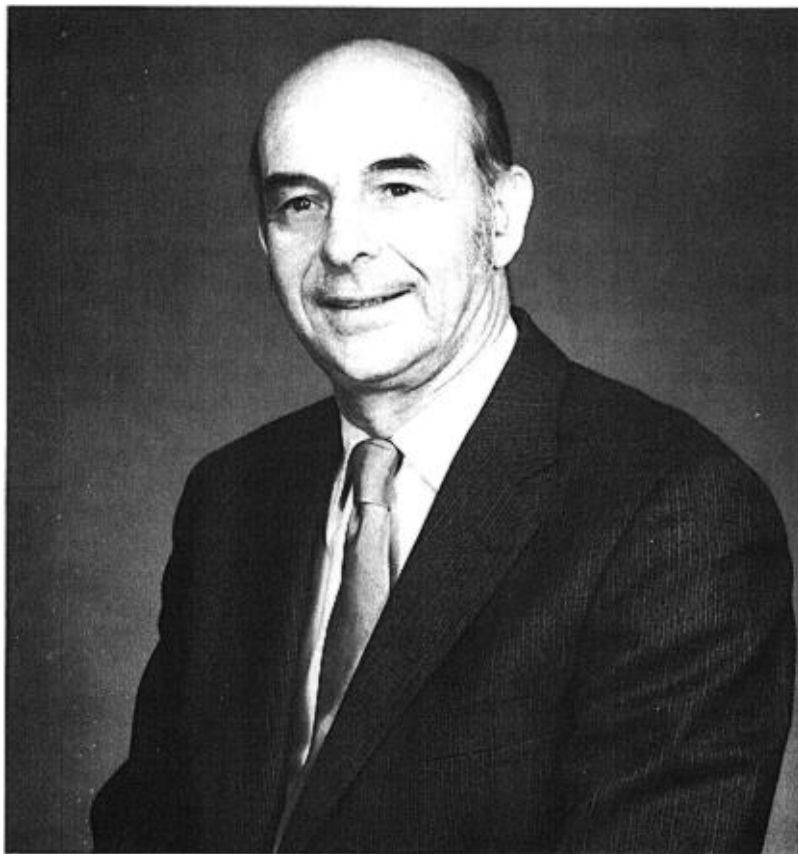


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IN MEMORIAM: BURT L. MONROE, JR., 1930-1994

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BURT L. MONROE, JR., 1930-1994

(Photograph taken in 1984)

Burt L. Monroe, Jr., AOU Member (1953), Elective Member (1966), Fellow (1973), Patron (1989), Treasurer (1968-75), Vice President (1983), President (1990-92), and Chair of the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature (1981-94), died prematurely on 14 May 1994. Born in Louisville, Kentucky on 25 August 1930, the only child of Ethelmae Tuell and Burt L.

Monroe, Sr., he succumbed after a long and heroic battle against cancer. With his passing at age 63, ornithology, his university, state, community, colleagues, family, and friends lost a remarkable man. He is survived by his wife, Rose, and two sons: Burt L. Monroe III, Rhodes Scholar and Assistant Professor of Political Science at Indiana University; and Mark S. Mon-

roe, a biology major at the University of Louisville and International Science Fair First Award winner.

I was first introduced to the myth of Burt Monroe as I sat with his father (himself an accomplished ornithologist and extraordinary man; see Mengel, *Auk* 88:88-96) in the mid-1950s, fulfilling the requirements of the Boy Scout bird study merit badge. At that time, Burt was in the Navy, stationed at Pensacola, Florida. There he was compiling astonishing records of Florida birds, including several new to the state. He would usually return to Louisville and participate in the Christmas Bird Count (a tradition until the end of his life; he and Rose went on the Pensacola count on their honeymoon!), and he and his father would always come up with extraordinary species that I knew only as the fantastic inhabitants of field guide plates. I idolized him from a distance, but did not know him personally until he returned to the University of Louisville (B.S. with highest honors, 1953) as Assistant Professor of Biology in 1965. I was an undergraduate there at the time, and Burt became my mentor and friend for the rest of his life.

During childhood, Burt was plagued by hay fever, asthma, and pneumonia. By all accounts, he was also preternaturally bright with an astonishing memory. Already deeply interested in birds, he spent a period of convalescence memorizing the Latin names (trinomials) of all North American birds from the *AOU Check-list*. By about age 12, according to Karl Maslowski, Burt would amaze his elders by instantly reciting all the possibilities when presented with the first three letters of any trinomial in *The Check-list*. His natural history interests extended beyond birds to lepidopterans, beetles and other insects, reptiles, and amphibians, and he continued to make published contributions in these areas throughout his life. His first publication appeared in 1945 (Short-eared Owls wintering near Louisville; *Kentucky Warbler* 21:56), written when he was 14 years old.

Burt entered the service immediately after graduation from college and served in the U.S. Navy from 1953 to 1959. He reached the rank of Lieutenant and spent the last years as a flight instructor at Pensacola. He enjoyed this work tremendously and was tempted to make a career in the Navy. His interest in flying persisted throughout his life. I flew with him only once, and he scared the hell out of me, but all evi-

dence indicates that he was a very skilled pilot (his flying was much better than his driving!). In May 1969, after 1,300 accident-free hours at the controls, Burt, Rose, and two-year-old Burt III were on their way to Pensacola when a generator failure forced an emergency landing at Nashville. The landing gear would not lock down and Burt made a belly landing amidst clouds of dust and metal screeching across concrete. Burt III was so impressed by all the fire trucks and emergency apparatus standing by that he requested Dad to do it again!

If there is one hallmark of Burt, it is that he was extraordinarily competent, a "can do" person. This was reflected in all sorts of circumstances. Many years ago, Burt and I were endeavoring to collect the first Kentucky specimen of Black-legged Kittiwake. It was clear that the specimen would fall into the flooded Ohio River and be rapidly carried downstream. There would be only one chance to retrieve it. My job was to shoot the bird and Burt was going to recover it by casting (with an ancient bait-casting rod and reel) a jitterbug (yellow, as I recall) and snagging the specimen with its treble hooks. It should be an easy shot with the old cast-off 12-gauge shotgun that Burt had given me, the shotgun with the faulty safety. Standing in readiness, waiting for the bird to pass by within range, the gun accidentally discharged, excavating an impressive hole in the ground only about an inch from Burt's foot. A lesser man might have been considerably put off by this, but the gull came past almost immediately thereafter, I (through some miracle) managed to hit it, and Burt, scrambling down the steep bank, hooked it on the second cast. Now and then, for the rest of his life, when needing some ammunition during an exchange of banter, Burt would exclaim, "Listen Able, you damn near shot my toe off!"

Exceptional competence and organization characterized all of Burt's work. When he arrived at Louisiana State University (LSU) from the Navy, he had already done all of the literature review for his dissertation on the birds of Honduras and had an immense card file of information. These skills and his maturity led George Lowery to select Burt to lead two major privately sponsored museum expeditions to Australia and New Zealand (spring 1960) and to Africa (summer 1961). This he accomplished with élan, and in August 1962, he began doing the field work that would culminate in *A Dis-*

tributional Survey of the Birds of Honduras (AOU Monograph No. 7, 1968). While at LSU, Burt met and married (December 1960) fellow graduate student Rose Sawyer of Memphis, Tennessee, and together they did the field work in Honduras. Burt received his Ph.D. in 1965. It was always my impression that Lowery regarded Burt as his finest student.

Burt's long history of service to the AOU began in 1968 as he watched his Pop die of a heart attack during an Internal Revenue Service audit of the AOU books. Burt, Sr., in very frail health for some years, had agreed to continue as Treasurer on the condition that Burt, Jr. would help out and be in a position to take over in case he could not continue. The audit, of course, found everything in perfect order, and Burt, Jr. became Treasurer, a position he held from 1968 to 1975. Many have no idea how massive a job the Treasurership was in those days before OSNA. Not only did the Treasurer keep the society's accounts, he also maintained the membership records, mailed dues notices, etc. Not the sort of job an untenured faculty member should be taking on, but Burt's reaction to such things was always, "Don't sweat it. I can do this." So respected was Burt's wisdom and advice, that in addition to the 12 years that he was an officer, he was elected to two terms as a Council Member. Almost inevitably, he became President-Elect in 1988 and President in 1990.

Burt was comfortable with his competence, sometimes even a bit cocky. He lobbied to be appointed to the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature (Check-list Committee), and joined it in 1977. The Sixth Edition of the Check-list was then in preparation, and Burt was a natural choice because of his extensive knowledge of Middle American birds, which were to be included for the first time in that edition. With the death of Eugene Eisenmann in 1981, Burt became Chair of the committee. He put his organizational and computer skills to work, prepared the entire text, and produced the final product in time for the 1983 Centennial meeting. Richard Banks, long-time member of the committee, said "... it is safe to say that there would not have been a 6th edition if Burt had not been added to the committee." Burt loved nothing more than this kind of project. He was a natural for it, arriving at the office each morning at dawn or before, and working on the Check-list for hours before the day's other activities began. He established annual winter

meetings of the committee and drafted all of the biannual supplements to the sixth edition. In the meantime, work began on the seventh edition. He completed its text and submitted it to the committee near the end of his life as his health was failing rapidly. In an enterprise where subjective opinion often carries as much weight as scientific evidence, Burt was a master at mediating conflict and molding consensus. No idealogue, his goal was always to get the job done and done well. I could not sum up Burt's service to the AOU any better than did the late Marion Jenkinson: "The American Ornithologists' Union would be a far different society had Burt Monroe not served it so well in the last twenty-five years." Hear, hear!

The facility with which the youthful Monroe mastered the *AOU Check-list* he later put to the larger task of the birds of the world. He probably knew the systematics and distribution of the world's birds better than any living ornithologist. Early on, Burt recognized the potential of DNA hybridization to reveal the relationships among the higher taxa of birds. In 1983, having just finished the sixth edition of the Check-list, Burt joined forces with Charles Sibley to produce a list of the birds of the world with taxonomic comments, geographic distributions, and notes on habitat. Sibley had begun the project in 1970, but the press of other work had stalled progress. Burt approached Sibley at the 1983 AOU meeting and offered to help: "I'm good at this and I love to do it!" Sibley (in litt., February 1996) describes the interaction that resulted from this understatement: "During the rest of 1983 we exchanged letters and phone calls and I sent him sections of the manuscript. In January, 1984, I went to Louisville with the material I had assembled and turned it over to Burt. We discussed how to proceed and drew up a short statement as our guide. Briefly, Burt would assume responsibility for completing the project and I would act as proof reader and contribute what I could. . . . Burt converted to a computerized script . . . changed the format, improved every aspect and, during the next six years, spent all available time on what became *Distribution and Taxonomy of the Birds of the World*. . . . We shared the pleasure of introducing the two books . . . at the International Ornithological Congress in New Zealand in December, 1990." Of his many contributions, I think Burt was most proud of this work. He knew that probably no one else on earth could

have done it. With customary thoroughness, he prepared a supplement to the book and used his computer skills to extract and produce the camera-ready pages for *A World Checklist of Birds* (1993).

Almost in his spare time, Burt accomplished an astonishing number of other tasks. Beginning in 1953 and continuing for the rest of his life, he compiled annual summaries of Christmas Bird Count high counts. How he was able to do this mind-boggling job with such a low error rate remains a mystery to me. Largely because no one else could be found to do it, he compiled the *Ten-Year Index to The Auk* for 1981–1990, and got it into publication in 1991 (at the time he was also serving as President). Throughout his entire professional career, he was the “keeper” of Kentucky ornithology, producing periodically (sometimes with co-authors) annotated check-lists of the state’s birds. He remained active in field work in Kentucky until his death, and his last major work was the posthumously published *The Birds of Kentucky* (1994). It is remarkable that he was able to complete this book. Being a relatively popular treatment, the text contains much of Burt’s personality.

All of the foregoing represents just one facet of Burt’s career; there were many more. Consider, for example, that he was an outstanding teacher (ornithology, herpetology, systematic zoology, zoogeography), named Teacher of the Year in 1975–76. Imagine, if you can, that he was Chairman of a medium-sized biology department for 23 (!) consecutive years (1970–1993), governing with his typical efficiency, skill at compromise, and sense of fairness. His interest in sports was legendary, especially his addiction to basketball. Beginning in 1976, he served as the faculty representative to the NCAA and the Metro Conference. He attended all home games, where his colleagues often could see him on television, sitting at the scorer’s table wearing his red Cardinal jacket. Because the University of Louisville is often a national basketball contender, he often attended tournament games as well. But he was not just a passive fan. He played full-court basketball twice a week until near the end of his life, and practiced with the Louisville Cardinals. At the 1991 AOU meeting in Montreal he played in a pick-up game with other (all younger) attendees. Afterwards, he was gleeful, having overheard one

of the other players ask, “How old is that guy?” after Burt drove past him. In recognition of his extraordinary contributions, his university presented him with a Distinguished Service Award in 1992.

Like his father, Burt devoted much of his life to service to his state and community. He served on many boards and committees, typically not just as a member, but in a position of responsibility. These included the Bernheim Forest Foundation (Vice President and President), Louisville Zoological Society, Louisville Zoological Commission (Chairman), Louisville Zoo Foundation (President), Kentucky Nature Preserves Commission, Nature and Conservation Center (Vice President), Citizen’s Jetport Advisory Committee, Beckham Bird Club (President), and Kentucky Ornithological Society (Vice President and President). He was widely respected and very well known in his city and state, the frequent subject of newspaper and magazine articles. His interest in UFOs, on which he lectured frequently, also generated considerable publicity.

Burt’s first encounter with cancer came in 1987 when an enormous tumor (extending from his kidney through the vena cava almost to the heart) and one kidney were removed. His recovery was rapid and apparently complete. But in the summer of 1992, he suffered a recurrence of the renal cell carcinoma, now metastasized to lung and bone. He began a series of treatments, some experimental. The doctors were amazed at his recuperative powers, and he attended the 1993 AOU meeting in Fairbanks with his optimism and interference in hand. While in Fairbanks, however, he experienced new symptoms, a prelude to the inevitable. I saw Burt for the last time at the AOU meeting in Montreal. During a wonderful dinner at a French restaurant, a group of us shared old stories (too loudly). Always jovial, Burt laughed so hard that tears were running down his cheeks, and he reached up with his right hand and rubbed his bald head in a gesture familiar to all who knew him. That is the way I like best to remember him.

Rose S. Monroe, Burt L. Monroe III, Richard C. Banks, Charles G. Sibley, Thomas R. Howell, Varley Wiedeman, and Charles Covell provided information that contributed substantially to the factual accuracy of this account.