



IN MEMORIAM: ALLAN R. PHILLIPS, 1914–1996

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INTRODUCTION

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Allan Robert Phillips died of cancer in his home in San Nicolas de los Garza, Nuevo Leon, Mexico, on 26 January 1996. *The Era of Allan R. Phillips: A Festschrift* will be published in March 1997. This will contain a biography, a bibliography, an annotated list of the taxa he described with current locations of his type material, and an overview of his contributions to ornithology (plus contributed papers in his honor).

Allan was born in New York City, 25 October 1914, and was the oldest of four children, brother George, sister Ruth, and half-sister Marjorie (Midge). His great great great grandfather had moved from London, England, and established an estate that occupied the area that would reach from 34th to 42nd streets, and from 5th Avenue to the East River. Allan graduated from Horace Mann School (then) for Boys in 1931, received his Master's degree from the University of Arizona in 1939, and his Ph.D. from Cornell in 1946 (spending most of 1942–1945 in the army!).

He was an extremely independent researcher throughout his life, with minimal support from outside sources. He taught at or was associated with several universities and museums in the United States and in Mexico. He moved to Mexico in 1957. Between 1933 and 1995 he published 168 papers and four books: *The Birds of Arizona* (coauthored with J. T. Marshall and G. Monson), *Checklist of Arizona Birds* (coauthored with G. Monson), and two volumes of what was to be a major series entitled *The Known Birds of North and Middle America*. He named (or renamed) 160 taxa of birds. Allan is survived by his siblings; his wife Juana Farfán Bautista de Phil-

lips; his three sons Robert, Edward, and Bryan; and his step children Nilo, Alejandro, Mela, and Anita.

A MAN BIGGER THAN LIFE: SOME REFLECTIONS

AMADEO M. REA

Readers of *Known Birds* (1986, 1991) who did not know Allan Phillips personally might well be put off by his seeming prickliness. These two volumes are Allan's private bullring where a tiny matador left many an ornithological sacred cow wounded on the arena floor. He skewers mercilessly those who don't get their facts straight. Words are never minced: "But zoopoliticians steadily display the political talent for reversing inconvenient facts to suit their fancies" (2:204, 1991). Gadfly, grinch, and genius, rolled into one. A man of contradictions, bigger than life. Who was this semi-legendary Allan Phillips?

Although small of stature, he claimed that he had once exceeded 100 pounds when a *cocinera* (cook) at some field station where Allan was boarding took it upon herself to fatten him up. His appetite was legendary. He ate with gusto, smacking his lips noisily at tasty morsels. He called mangos "One of the Lord's better inventions." Surely he made an excellent choice in Juana as a wife. In her modest-sized kitchen she could always produce one steaming hot course after another of the finest Mexican cuisine. Over the years, though, he finally conceded that I could out-eat him. He would sit at table, uncover a dish, and exclaim, "Ah, Amadeo's favorite dish—food!" I'm sure the phrase had originally been applied to him.

Allan was naturally endowed with several traits that suited him admirably for a role he cut out for himself very early in his youth, in-



ALLAN R. PHILLIPS, 1914–1996

(Photograph taken in 1970 by R. S. Palmer)

cluding an intense focus, enormous energy, an almost uncanny memory, and an eye for color. Throughout his life Allan maintained a cultured focus on his defined intellectual objectives. His field of attention was the alpha taxonomy of birds. In a culture plagued by diffuse attention and the cult of mediocrity, he was a radical. His entire energies were poured into his specific field and its immediate ramifica-

tions (usually loss of habitat and biodiversity). Most other subjects received a cultivated inattention.

To this end he was a skin-smith par excellence. He honed infraspecific studies to a fine art. As a result of Phillips' continual upbraidings, research into geographic variation and subspecies' migrations will never be quite the same. Above all others, he insisted most vocifer-

erously on using only comparable specimens—preferably in fresh fall plumage. His keen eye was always attuned to discerning problems caused by non-genetic factors such as wear, fading, soiling, and foxing. Certainly, many named subspecies are nothing more than artifacts resulting from comparing newly collected series with decades-old specimens that have undergone postmortem color change. Often he decried the taxonomic uselessness of the “highest breeding plumage” so much in vogue.

Allan’s singular focus could be exasperating. One time at a camp in Mexico I had a flat on my old pickup truck. Allan summarized the situation with his philosophical, “When the inevitable happens, relax and enjoy it.” He dug out his catalog and rapidograph, found a shady spot, and commenced writing labels, while I changed the tire, unassisted. Another time in the Pacific Northwest we stopped on the beach in the rain to fix a hasty lunch. Instead of helping, Allan slipped into the woods with the .22, returning just minutes later dangling a warbler. “First state record for Oregon!” he exclaimed.

Of the avian groups that he dealt with, Allan probably had personally examined about every critical specimen in all major (and not a few minor) North American museums. What was most intimidating was that he seemed to remember every one, recalling date, locality, and collector, as well as his determination of its characteristics and identity. In addition to his utterly phenomenal memory, he assembled copious notes on most specimens passing thorough his hands. All species falling under the rubric of “small birds” were grist for the Phillipsian mill, particularly if they posed complicated problems. The meaning of “small” got stretched at times, but readers of *The Birds of Arizona* will note the inverse ratio between body size and depth of taxonomic treatment.

Allan’s facility with languages was no less than that with birds. He spoke both French and German fluently, facilitating his work in European museums and his study of the foreign literature. Ultimately Spanish became his most frequently used language. Once, when we were collecting in the Venezuelan Andes, we stopped at a local visitors’ center to inquire about directions. The attendant, on hearing Allan and William Schaldach’s Mexican Spanish, exclaimed, “What beautiful Castilian! How

good to hear it correctly spoken.” For both it was their second language.

While in his writings Allan sometimes labeled others as indefatigable, the term appropriately applied to him as well. One could only marvel at his sustained energy. He would work all day with scarcely a break for lunch and tea, then resume work until far into the night. One time he had finished a whirlwind museum-hopping trip of eastern U. S. institutions, then various European ones, then flew cross-country to Tucson, where I picked him up and brought him to my tiny graduate-student studio. “Is there a place where I can rest?” he asked. I motioned to the pad atop a series of skin cases where he could lie down. “No, I mean a desk.” By “rest” he had meant sitting down and writing specimen labels.

Few people are aware of the massive correspondence that Allan maintained throughout his life. Over the 35 years that I knew him, we exchanged hundreds of letters. He always answered questions pointedly and concisely, with an economy of words. If he supplied data, they were in an idiosyncratic sequence that had to be unscrambled, sometimes painfully. Typed letters were packed; wasted space, such as margins, was an anathema. One of the tricks I marveled at was his practice of arranging a sentence so that the line below it could repeat a needed word; then he would use ditto marks rather than type it again.

Although never a collegiate professor for long, Allan became mentor for numerous ornithological students throughout North America. He encouraged and empowered anyone who would honestly seek answers by collecting appropriately and critically comparing specimens in useful plumage. The greenest novice he treated respectfully. There was no room for ornithological dogma in Allan’s training. Everything had to be looked at anew, always with better material.

Allan had great appreciation for the early taxonomists who had laid the groundwork for American ornithology. He was fond of remarking that Robert Ridgway *forgot* more than most modern ornithologists will ever *know*. Perhaps the same could be said of Allan as well. He had conceived the *Known Birds* series as a mini-Ridgway. We must be satisfied with the two relatively slim (but Phillipsian packed) volumes that actually were published, while wondering

how much might have been produced had he received outside support and started this life-task earlier. But beware the person on a pedestal. Like an ornithological Don Quixote, Allan delighted in upsetting and thoroughly skewering anyone who didn't get his facts in line. Smoke screens and other gobbledygook he exposed unmercifully, stabbing with one hand, pouring in salt with the other. This earned him no friends. Diplomacy wasn't a virtue he particularly cultivated; some said he had none. The pages of *Known Birds* are a virtual bloody battlefield of exposed faulty research not measuring up to his unrelenting standards. Some think of this as the musings of an excessively demanding purist, while others see it as an attempt to raise alpha taxonomy to ever higher standards. In either case, post-Phillipsian ornithology will never be the same.

Allan was a constant advocate for improving the quality of existing collections. On page after page of *Known Birds* will be found queries with the annotation that this is the best that can be done until better material is available for comparison. Likewise will be found his constant reminders that those who should be promoting knowledge of birds specifically and biodiversity in general often are the very ones who impede our access to scientific knowledge.

Allan had a number of well-known institutional targets, among them the International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature and the American Ornithologists' Union, which he considered associations of bumbling politicians if not outright liars. (One might wish that the latter had been not *quite* such a broad target for his lampooning!) In particular, the AOU Committee on Classification and Nomenclature, with its periodic check-lists, took the brunt of Allan's criticisms. For an analysis of the AOU's incessant name-changing, read the section "Vernacular Nomenclature" in *Known Birds* (1: xlix-liv, 1986). But Allan justified his jousting: "Sorry; I beg today's readers' indulgence. One could smile silently at all these amusing AOU idiosyncracies, were they not worshiped as true gospel by today's U.S.A. 'scientific community,' birders, etc., and forced down every-

one's throats by ignorant editors and 'peer reviewers.' Tomorrow, we may hope, AOU 1983 will be mercifully forgotten (along with Lysenko, etc.)" (2:145-146, 1991).

Allan had a way of boiling complicated problems down to their essentials. As political pundit, he was fond of saying that since World War II, regardless of what party or president happened to be in power in the United States, the Pentagon has de facto rule of the country; one has only to look at the national budget.

Prickly yes, humorless no. In music, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas were Allan's favorite. He could sing passages by the hour. This included the original scores as well as reworked parodies targeting prominent ornithologists. As for writings, one could not be around Allan long without learning segments of Robert Williams Wood's *How to Tell the Birds from the Flowers*. Robert William Service was another favorite. He was fond of reciting in entirety "*The Cremation of Sam McGee*." Allan's dislike of the cold made this poem most appropriate. Will Cuppy's *How to Become Extinct* and *How to Tell your Friends from the Apes* were other delights. He knew chapters by heart, I discovered. Once in Mexico City I was reading Cuppy to the boys in the living room. I accidentally transposed a minor phrase in a sentence. Allan, at work in his upstairs study, called down the correction.

For some, "Phillips' Law" of geographic variation, as summarized by his friend Joe Marshall, states: From north to south there is commonly an increase in size of birds that live at increasing altitudes in the mountains southward. But those who knew Allan better are familiar with his more universal "law": There is innate perversity in all things, animate and inanimate.

Avian alpha taxonomy has been changed by the qualities that Allan brought so unflinchingly to the subject. He was an exacting, uncompromising scientist. Such people are difficult to live with. Still, in spite of the intensity of his focus on ornithology, Allan could be a devoted husband and doting, if demanding, father to his own and his adopted children. In his later years he could sign letters to professional colleagues, "Love, Allan." That's not too prickly.