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IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM B. ROBERTSON, JR., 1924–2000

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WILLIAM B. ROBERTSON, JR., 1924–2000
(Photo taken August 1992.)

With the death of William Beckwith Robertson, Jr., gone is the "Dean of Florida Ornithology." Vast knowledge of the habits, habitats, and history of Florida's avifauna qualified Bill for that title, and it may be that no one again will earn it. Bill began studying the birds of Florida and the nearby West Indies when he went to south Florida in 1950; he remained a student of the subject until he died of a heart attack on 28 January 2000.

Born in Berlin, Illinois, on 22 August 1924, Bill's interest in birds began when he was about 10 years old. An interest in ornithology must have soon followed as evidenced by the fact that he published a breeding-bird census in Audubon Magazine in 1941. Bill's higher education started at Carthage College, where he obtained an A.B. degree majoring in biology and English (1947). He obtained M.S. (1949) and Ph.D. (Animal Ecology, 1955) degrees from the University of Illinois, where S. Charles Kendeigh directed his doctoral work. Part way through his time at Illinois, Bill walked into Dr. Kendeigh's office just when he was contemplating having a student work on birds in the "tropical West Indian biome." Bill became that student. His dissertation, which appeared in 1955, is entitled "An analysis of the breeding-bird populations of tropical Florida in relation to the vegetation."

While conducting field work for his dissertation, Bill served as a National Park Service Collaborator (1950–1951) and as a Seasonal Fire Control Aide (1951–1952) at Everglades National Park. In 1956, he became a full-time employee as a biologist for the Park. That position seemed to fit perfectly with his desire to conduct field ecological research. However, after a few years it became clear he was expected to deal with a never-ending series of "Park environmental problems." The job became one of listening to, reading, and producing responses to those presentations without time provided to really study and understand the problems involved.

Bill was shy as a youth and quiet as a man. His quietness turned into strength during meetings at the Park. While others heatedly discussed issues, often touting their own work, Bill would sit and absorb. Then toward the end of the meeting, aroused by what he had heard, Bill would speak, quietly and deliberately. Those who knew, listened.

Bill was a naturalist, interested in plants and animals, and he published on both. His ornithological publications, which included many federal technical reports, pertain to West Indian ornithogeography, based in part on trips to the Virgin Islands, population ecology of raptors and long-legged waders, based on field work on Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*), herons, ibises and storks in Everglades National Park, and population ecology of seabirds, with field work on Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuscata*) at the Dry Tortugas.

Bill was a founding member of the Florida Ornithological Society, which came into being in the early 1970s. He served the society in a variety of capacities until his death. He was the first president and served for two terms (1973–1974). Together he and I published *Florida Bird Species: An Annotated List*, (1992) as a special publication of the society. In addition to being extremely knowledgeable about birds and Florida's biota, Bill was an excellent writer. As many will attest, Bill was always ready to help someone else.

Bill joined the AOU in 1955, became an Elective Member in 1963, and a Fellow in 1977. Awards and honors from other organizations include a Distinguished Service Award from the Department of Interior, an Award for Excellence from the George M. Wright Society, and the Herbert W. Kale III Award of the Florida Chapter of The Wildlife Society. Bill was made an Honorary Member of the Florida Ornithological Society and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Bill's wife Betty (Mary J. Robertson), who also was a member of the AOU, was his collaborator on the Sooty Tern project. She died only months before Bill. Bill is survived by his three children and nine siblings. In 1992, Bill and Betty, along with her mother, weathered Hurricane Andrew huddled on the floor behind mattresses while the interior of their Homestead home became part of the storm.

In the 1970s and 1980s I assembled the crews who helped with banding the terns at the Tortugas. Those crews went to the islands twice a year, once in spring to catch banded adults and once in summer to band (all) chicks. During twice daily visits to the colony, just past dawn and shortly before sunset, we worked hard herding chicks into corrals and fetching recalcitrant individuals from vegetation. Among the

most regular participants were Ted Below, who unerringly could net banded adults as they flew overhead, Chet Winegarner, who could fetch the most hidden chicks from the cactus patches, and Ralph and Betty Ann Schreiber. Following the afternoon trip we played hard. The cocktails parties were long sessions during which we talked about birds, especially terns, mixed with much folderol. Bill was in his glory during those times.

Often with a vodka tonic in hand, and a crooked, devilish grin beneath his shock of dark hair, Bill would very slowly and quietly compose his response to a question. Those answers, as they took shape, would emerge as publishable sentences and paragraphs. They came from a man who clearly knew more than he said in a job and an age in which he too often was surrounded by those prone to saying more than they knew.