

OBITUARIES

Edited by James Wiley

(To whom obituary manuscripts should be sent)

William B. Robertson, Jr.—Neotropical ornithology lost a singular soul with the death of William B. Robertson, Jr., on 29 January 2000, at his home in Homestead, Florida. Born on 22 August 1924, he was 75 at his passing. Born in Berlin, Illinois, Bill Robertson obtained an A.B. degree at Carthage College in 1947, an M.S. degree in 1949 and a Ph.D. in 1955 from the University of Illinois, Urbana. He came to south Florida during his doctoral studies and stayed for the rest of his life. A vast majority of those years was spent in southern Florida, where for five decades he was considered by all to be the principal ornithological authority for the state and, for many years also, for the nearby Caribbean.

He came by his authority through the dint of long experience tempered by a profound intelligence. In 1950, he was sent to study the birds of southern Florida and Bahamas by his distinguished major professor, the late Charles Kendeigh of the University of Illinois, – which five years later resulted in a monumental dissertation which set the faunistic baseline for the region, deciphered the region's biogeographic code, and identified prominent ecological forces that shaped the birds' habitat. He was hired as the second biologist in the relatively new Everglades National Park and remained there in essentially that capacity for the rest of his life, observing, cataloguing, thinking, interpreting, and remembering. The pieces that comprise the unique personage that was Bill Robertson are many, but for starters, he was quiet, delib-

erate, and committed.

His quietness may have been his most enduring and effective trait. It partly was shyness; it partly was tactics. I sat with him through many a meeting, with heated discussion flying in all directions and Bill retreated to study his fingernails – not disengaged just quiet – until aroused toward the meeting's ending moments, mustering his deep understanding to prick the balloons of uninformed opinion and overstuffed egos. By being quiet what he said spoke all the more loudly. And that quiet spirit is what, I think, attracted generations of young biologists to his side. He was a mentor to hundreds, each of whom could speak with affection of special interactions with “Dr. Bill.” In his quietness, he listened when most such authorities only talk. Each young biologist took away a sense that his or her thoughts mattered. I had the honor to have Bill sit on my graduate committee and at my side as I tried to figure out what being a research biologist was all about. Throughout the long mentorship, I knew I could always count on him. That is the feeling all his understudies have.

He was deliberative in all things. He took in everything, cogitated long and deeply, interpreted with extreme care, pronounced sparingly, and wrote even more sparingly. His colleagues, particularly when young and brash, (and his bosses) were sometimes frustrated with this deliberateness, especially for so gifted a writer and so knowledgeable a man. The reason for this trait was simple; he

was a perfectionist and no project is ever perfect. One role played by colleagues, particularly his younger ones, was to be gifted with a collaboration that encouraged the end of a writing project to be found. The result was that the core of his major scientific work, while not as voluminous in the standard literature as some, is as solid as it comes. For completeness, his dissertation *The Birds of Southern Florida* and its evolutionary derivations such as his report on *A Survey of the Effects of Fire in Everglades National Park*, *The Southern Florida Avifauna in Environments of South Florida*, and *Florida Bird Species* for the Florida Ornithological Society, are the definitive statements on the southern Florida avifauna and its habitat. For memorable nature writing, nothing can beat *The Park Story*. His Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*) papers, from the 1964 milestone *Terns of the Dry Tortugas* through later notes including his paper in *Nature* demonstrating transatlantic migration, are the definitive statements on that population. Unfortunately with his passing, much lies unpublished from his half-million banding database.

His commitment to conservation, natural resources management, and the southern Florida and Caribbean landscape was second to none. Salary, or bosses, or politics, or economics didn't sway him. He was swayed only by what he knew to be so. And above all he knew that knowledge, research, and engage-

ment were in the end the only ways these systems would be properly conserved.

His interest in the Neotropics came naturally from his Florida-Bahamas comparative studies, which showed him the intriguing biogeographic connectivities and discontinuities of the southern Florida avifauna from those to the south and east. This led to a question that interested him his entire life: why were not more neotropical species also established in southern Florida? In preparation for the new national park, he did the definitive reconnaissance of birds of St. John published in his *Observations on the Birds of St. John, Virgin Islands*. He sparked the addition of a West Indies regional report in *Audubon Field Notes*, which began the process of collecting both information and a network of observers in the region. His seabird work, focused at the Dry Tortugas, was the model for a long-term banding study for the region.

One measure of Dr. Robertson's life was his contribution to science and conservation. But to a person, those who had the privilege of knowing him would measure his life in the attention, encouragement, wise council, and friendship he offered so willingly.

I wish to thank Glen Woolfenden, Sonny Bass, James Wiley, and François Vuilleumier for their advice on this memorial.—James A. Kushlan, P. O. Box 429, Annapolis, Maryland 21404, USA.