

In memoriam: Dr. Robert L. Norton, 1945–2022

Andrew Dobson^{*1}, Natasha Atkins², Patricia Bradley³, Jaime Collazo⁴, Natalia Collier⁵, Daphne Gemmill⁶, Scott Johnson⁷, Anthony Levesque⁸, Fred Schaffner⁹, Lisa Sorenson¹⁰, Ann Sutton¹¹, Joseph M. Wunderle, Jr.¹²

The passing of Dr. Robert Leslie Norton (Rob) has deprived the Caribbean of a prominent ornithologist—one who has contributed so much to the region's birding community. Rob's childhood years were spent in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, where he explored the countryside near Sunset Park and in Scarborough. A love for birdwatching and a fascination with nature developed with his 'Science and Nature Club'—formed with a handful of neighborhood boys. After graduating from high school in South Portland in 1964, he entered Central Connecticut State College (CCSC), gaining a degree in geography. While at CCSC, Rob enlisted into the US Air Force. His affinity for physical science saw him undertaking weather observations for the Air Force for the next five years in Massachusetts. It was during this time that bird watching became an obsession. Rob worked part time at the University of Connecticut with the Connecticut State Climate Center, researching past weather events. He enrolled in biology classes while working there and ornithology was a part of his studies. His interests eventually led him to an internship at Manomet Bird Observatory, near Cape Cod. These experiences led to his dedication to environmental research and impact studies.

An invitation from a University of Connecticut friend to visit the Virgin Islands was to determine the course of his career and family life. Immediately enthralled by the bird life and the tropical environment, Rob worked as a seabird researcher for the U.S. Virgin Island (USVI) government for seven years, and this experience brought an everlasting connection to the people and the culture in this remarkable part of the world. In St. John, USVI, he was part owner of a small newspaper; he was hired as the second director of the British Virgin Island's National Parks Trust (a non-profit that protects natural and cultural heritage); and he met his wife-to-be, Sheryl.

Rob was the originator of the West Indies & Bermuda regional report, first appearing in *American Birds* in 1980. His introduction in the first report reads as follows:

This initial report of avifauna in the West Indies intends to stimulate and encourage observers who, through residence or long familiarity with the area, wish to contribute to the dynamics of bird study in a region somewhat



Robert L. Norton. Photo: Holbrook Travel Road Scholar.

neglected as a source of continuing knowledge of tropical American birds (*American Birds*, September 1980).

He continued in this capacity through *Field Notes* and *North American Birds* for over 40 years. Rob had a vast knowledge of the region's birds and of the threats that they face. Rob's introductions to seasonal bird reports were full of meteorological details, including above or below average temperatures and rainfall, how this had affected vegetation and water levels, and most importantly, the likely effect on birds. Rob did not shy away from highlighting important bird habitat that was at risk of loss due to local government action or inaction. His introductory remarks to the Fall 2017 seasonal report are a harrowing account—the season of two category 5 hurricanes, Irma and Maria, and their likely catastrophic effects on the Barbuda Warbler and Imperial Parrot. He did not ignore the effects on the human population, including those of his beloved Virgin Islands, where he chronicled that a young British Virgin Islander, on emerging from his fractured shell of a home said, "I don't know where I am."

When Rob returned to the US in 1990, he enrolled at Goddard College and earned an MA in biogeography, after which he went

*Corresponding author: ¹Co-editor, West Indies and Bermuda Regional Report, *North American Birds*, e-mail: andrewdobs@gmail.com. Full list of author information is available at the end of the article.

to Columbia Pacific University for his Ph.D. in environmental science. Subsequently, Rob spent 1992 with the Smithsonian's Natural History and Ornithology Department in Washington, DC. Next, he moved to Gainesville, Florida, where he taught science courses at Santa Fe College and worked with Alachua County government as an environmental specialist and planner until his retirement in 2008. When most people would be taking it a little easier in retirement, Rob trained and competed in the World Senior Track and Field Games in Australia.

Rob was a founding member of the regional non-profit Society of Caribbean Ornithology (now BirdsCaribbean) and delighted in attending the organization's conferences and assisting with various conservation projects, especially those encouraging capacity building for bird research, monitoring, and education of youth and local communities. Rob contributed to many publications and will be particularly remembered for *An Inventory of Breeding Seabirds of the Caribbean* (2009), which he co-edited with Patricia E. Bradley.

Rob is survived by his wife Sheryl, five children, nine grandchildren, sister Tery, and several nieces and nephews. The BirdsCaribbean community offers them our sincere condolences. Rob was well respected by a large network of friends and colleagues, many of whom wished to provide their own memories. These recollections paint a picture of an individual who cared deeply about the environment, its bird life, and his encouragement for others in their endeavors.

Andrew Dobson:

Rob had been single-handedly producing seasonal bird reports for the West Indies in *North American Birds* for over 20 years when the late Tony White and I were invited to become co-editors. This was in 2002, after which we expanded the coverage to include Bermuda. What a privilege it was to be part of the team with Rob as such a knowledgeable captain. I look back on the hundreds of emails we exchanged and the professionalism he demonstrated. He was responsible for making sure that regional bird records over the past 40 years were documented. What a great legacy. I will miss his sage advice but above all, his friendship.

Natasha Atkins:

Back in 1975, when I was an intern at the then Manomet Bird Observatory, I took a canoe trip with Rob and another Manomet friend of his to Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, off Chatham on Cape Cod. It was a pretty long trip, 3 or 4 miles, and the guys did all the paddling. We spent the day watching shorebirds/waders, and as we headed back to the canoe for the return trip, a gull dropped a hot dog right in front of us, which was hilarious. By the time we got back in the boat, the wind had picked up pretty strongly, and we were already riding about 4 inches above the surface with two big guys and me in the canoe. It was a bit of a hair-raising trip back, but Frank's and Rob's good humor kept me from getting too panicky. It's the only time I spent with Rob, but 45 years later it's still a wonderful memory.

Patricia E. Bradley:

Rob was a wonderful, dedicated, and courageous man. Rob and I go back to the early 1980s, when I began sending records



Robert L. Norton. Photo: Tery Norton Mattison

from the Cayman Islands and we began a friendship that extended at our first meeting in Jamaica in 1985 and continued thereafter. Our last meeting was when Rob and Sheryl visited Grand Cayman, and I took him to see our Vitelline Warbler. The *Inventory of Caribbean Seabirds* published in 2009 was our response to the increasing threats and population declines throughout the region, and it leaned on the work of Schreiber and Lee 2000 and van Halewyn and Norton 1984. It was a challenge to find and persuade seabird specialists to produce a chapter on their Caribbean island and share their inventory. It was also great fun as we worked with English, Dutch, French, and Spanish authors for what seemed like years, and using Rob's exhaustive understanding of the regions' birds. The GIS analysis and maps by William Mackin were an essential part of the publication. It was also a time when Rob was dealing with cancer surgery and my husband was in the final stage of cancer, and so the project kept us focused.

Jaime Collazo:

I met Rob when he worked at the Division of Fish & Wildlife,



The group of four shows the compilers of the West Indies and Bermuda report for North American Birds in Grand Bahama in July 2011. (Left to right: Andrew Dobson, Anthony Levesque, Robert Norton, Eddie Massiah). Photo: Frantz Delcroix.

USVI. He provided much-needed support for my research at that time, and during the mid-'80s, we advocated in various forums for conservation of avifauna in the U.S. Caribbean. I always appreciated Rob's "never give up" attitude. He will be missed!

Natalia Collier:

Robert was a mentor to Adam and me as we began working in the Caribbean, providing helpful advice and perspective. He was always ready to answer questions thoughtfully and kindly. His 2009 inventory is dog-eared and worn after countless references as we worked on the Seabird Breeding Atlas of the Lesser Antilles and other seabird-related manuscripts. I'm sure there are many others who were also influenced by his research and generous nature, and his legacy will carry on in his work and those he helped along their paths.

Daphne Gemmill:

I only met Rob once or twice many years ago. However, we corresponded frequently regarding Vieques and Puerto Rican birds. His input was invaluable. He was on my unofficial Vieques rare birds committee. He will be missed.

Scott Johnson:

My fondest memory of Robert Norton was in 2017, when I was working at the Bahamas National Trust and participated in the "Expedition Parks 242" field trip on Andros. I was taking some of the participants birding, in north/central Andros. Robert, an avid birder and researcher was interested in seeing a Bahama Oriole: one of our endemic birds and a critically endangered species. We visited a few locations with no luck. I honestly thought my skills as a birder and guide were going to be dashed in the Andros pinelands as we visited more locations and still did not find the bird. Finally, I took him and Vivian Moultrie, an Inagua bird guide and one of the persons responsible for creating the motto on our Coat of Arms, to a place called "The Atala Forest." This site was filled with Atala Hairstreaks, in the hundreds. As we walked through the forest, lo and behold, a Bahama Oriole made an appearance, a lifer bird for Robert. Rest in peace, Robert. I wish I had spent more time talking to you, and I always appreciated your witty comments on my social media posts. You will be missed my friend.

Anthony Levesque:

I met Rob for the first time in 2011 in the Bahamas during a

BirdsCaribbean meeting. He was with Andrew Dobson and Eddie Massiah, and two years later I replaced Eddie to be part of the West Indies and Bermuda Team for North American Birds magazine with the encouragement and benevolence of Rob. For years and years Rob was the number one birder in the Caribbean (with nearly 450 species), and when I overtook him, he immediately sent me a message of congratulations. A great loss to the Caribbean birding community.

Fred Schaffner:

I have known Rob for over 37 years and was deeply saddened by his passing. We first shared some great adventures on a number of trips in a small motorboat travelling between Cul-debra, Red Hook, and Little Tobago in the early 1980's to make observations of seabirds with my doctoral mentor, Colin Penny-cuick (deceased), and John Taylor (also deceased), resulting in a number of reports and a small publication on the expansion of Cayenne Terns on the Puerto Rico Bank. Rob was a wonderful, cheerful person, a great friend, fully dedicated to bird conservation, and a founding member of what is now BirdsCaribbean. I will be forever grateful for having had his friendship, and I mourn his loss.

Lisa Sorenson:

Rob was a founding member of BirdsCaribbean in 1988 (then called the Society of Caribbean Ornithology). Since then, he made countless contributions to our knowledge of Caribbean birds and helped advance conservation through mentoring, research, and authoring many notable publications. Rob cared passionately about the region's birds and was concerned about threats to their long-term survival. He worked hard and volunteered his time to educate the public and mentored our members to help build capacity of the region's biologists. I will always remember Rob as a kind, generous, and gentle soul, always engaged and willing to lend a hand to whoever needed help. I just wish we had more time with Rob, but we will treasure the memories that we have and always be inspired by his commitment and hard work to understand and protect the Caribbean's invaluable birds.

Ann Sutton:

This is a sad loss for Caribbean ornithology. Rob was an inspiration to me, especially because of his contributions to our knowledge of Caribbean seabirds.

Joseph M. Wunderle, Jr:

I was saddened to hear of Rob's passing, as he has made major contributions to our understanding of avian distribution and natural history in the Caribbean. Although his numerous contributions will live on, he will be missed by many.

Author Information

¹Co-editor, West Indies and Bermuda Regional Report, North American Birds, e-mail: andrewdobs@gmail.com, ²Arlington, Virginia, ³P.O. Box 2394, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands, ⁴Professor, Applied Ecology, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695, ⁵EPIC, 411 Walnut Street #6749, Green Cove Springs, FL, ⁶Washington DC, ⁷Environmental Scientist, Bron Ltd., Nassau, The Bahamas, ⁸Le Moule, Guadeloupe, ⁹Professor, Environmental Sciences and Biology, Universidad del Turabo, Puerto Rico, ¹⁰Executive Director, BirdsCaribbean, ¹¹Marshall's Pen, Mandeville, Jamaica, ¹²International Institute of Tropical Forestry, USDA Forest Service, Sabana Field Research Station, Luquillo, Puerto Rico.

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