

IN MEMORIAM



WILLIAM B. ROBERTSON, JR

22 AUGUST 1924– 29 JANUARY 2000

ROBERT L. NORTON
Gainesville, Florida

The dust-jacket biography of *Florida Bird Species: an annotated list*¹ condensed William B. Robertson, Jr's ornithological history into these few sentences:

"[William Robertson] began studying landbird populations in southern Florida and the northern Bahamas in 1950 for his Ph.D. research, and received a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in 1955. Soon afterwards, he was employed as a research biologist in Everglades Natl Park. In 1976 he was awarded the United States Department of Interior Medal of Distinguished Service and is Senior Scientist at the South Florida Research Center. A Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, he has published more than a 100 articles on the Everglades ecosystem and on the birds of Florida and the West Indies. Besides his reputation as the dean of Florida ornithologists, and his service as first president of the Florida Ornithological Society, Robertson is best known for his studies of the seabirds of Florida's Dry Tortugas, including discovery of the remarkable trans-Atlantic migration of juvenile Sooty Terns."

But those who knew Bill or "Dr. Bill" recognized him for more than his award-winning work at Everglades National Park. His work in the Everglades is being credited, in part, for saving one of North America's greatest resources. Clearly, there is much more to be done, but the Glades' pinelands and hammocks would not be what they are today without his pioneering work. Bill researched, studied, and understood the use of fire as a restorative ecological tool in the days when fire was a four-letter word.

But Bill's influence goes well beyond the limits of tropical Florida. Bill's escape from the embers of bureaucracy was his love of Sooty Terns. He, his wife Betty, students, and volunteers annually retreated to the Dry Tortugas to band as many sooties as they could. They managed to tag more than one half million birds before budget concerns and acces-

sibility by the public began to make their encampment less productive. Many papers and notes resulted from this work. His retirement from the National Park Service in 1997 would allow him to return to sharing and answering questions about Sooty Terns and, ultimately, other long-lived seabirds of the tropics. Bill used to grin in his special way about what else might be coming from the intimate work he and others were teasing out of the daily lives of these birds from year to year, which is a model long-term study^{2,3}. When Hurricane Andrew (1992) ripped through Homestead, Florida and decimated Bill's home and library, he suffered a major setback in his data collation, cataloguing, and preparation of early drafts of manuscripts. Sadly, Bill's wife, Betty, passed away recently. In the 1990s Bill and Dr. Glen Woolfenden co-authored *Florida Bird Species*, and he authored a comprehensive account of sooties in *Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals*³. You can feel Bill's logic and common sense approach to the state's list of birds as you read the introduction and species accounts. He was equally well known for his ability to sear through congested thinking and arguments with his economical logic and problem solving. And he could do all this with humor and affection. His intellect was the true measure of his stature. He was a man's man.

After the Rockefeller brothers donated about two-thirds of St. John, a 19 square mile former Dutch protectorate, to the National Park Service; and the U. S. Virgin Islands government considered converting St. Thomas' largest mangrove lagoon into a major jet-port in the mid-1950s, Robertson was assigned the duty of preparing faunal surveys of the fledgling park and venerable Bennerson Bay lagoon. As a result of the St. John survey, a paper appeared in 1962⁴ that was the first manuscript devoted to birds of the Virgin Islands since those of Wetmore (1927), Danforth (1935), Beatty (1941), Nichols (1943), and Sea-

man (1957).

Robertson's work opened the way for greater understanding of the plight of neotropical migrants, seabirds, and native landbirds for small islands east of Cuba and Puerto Rico. As a graduate student, I visited the Virgin Islands initially as my escape from the New England winter, taking Bill's report as my guide to the Islands birds. Upon my return and consultation with my advisor, Dr. George Clark, we decided that an update was needed and could be the core of my thesis. I contacted Bill in March 1978, and we began a protracted, mentor-based relationship that would span two decades. His paper was the nexus to my experience and meager, by comparison, contribution to West Indian ornithogeography.

One outcome from my Virgin Islands experience was a proposal to inaugurate a West Indies regional report in *American Birds*. The late Bob Arbib, and Assistant Editor Susan R. Drennan, did not hesitate at the chance to expand the geographic influence of the journal to match the lives of North American birds, a overarching response to Bill Robertson's investigations in 1957, in the tropics that he knew and loved. Bill was a frequent guest editor and analyst of seasonal reports as well as editor of the Florida region for *Audubon Field Notes*, the antecedent of *American Birds*, now *North American Birds*.

I first met Bill in 1979 in San Francisco at a science in the national parks conference which we both attended and where we presented papers. We corresponded more frequently thereafter when I worked for the government of Virgin Islands as a seabird biologist. There was a sizable Sooty Tern colony on Saba Cay, one of the many islands off Thomas. My co-workers and I were eventually getting band returns from previous efforts and among them were birds we did not recognize. They were some of Bill's half million birds from the Dry Tortugas. Now we were communicating on a different level, like days of old. We decided to let other seabird workers in the region know about this phenomenon and jointly presented a paper on Sooty Tern recruitment⁵ in 1982.

Seabird studies throughout the region began to take on greater importance after Bill's paper on the recovery of juvenile sooties from Dry Tortugas in the Gulf of Guinea⁶. It expanded our view that these creatures have international lifestyles and conservation requirements. His note on the discovery of the Black Noddy in the Dry Tortugas⁷ was also a clarion call to be mindful seabird distribution and their dynamics. The boundaries or barriers to understanding seabird ecology in the western North Atlantic were melting away as more and more work was being

done abroad, in large part a response to Bill's investigations in the Dry Tortugas.

When Bill visited me in St. John in 1988 while on national park business, the Virgin Islands-based West Indies region report was in its tenth year; and four Christmas Bird Counts were up and running on three islands. A Virgin Islands Audubon Society had been established and was centered at the new park research station. Researchers from stateside academia were coming to study Virgin Islands' flora and fauna. These accomplishments were fitting testimony to Bill's investigations in 1957 and his continued support of the Virgin Islands National Park. Rare is a text or major paper on birds in the region that does not cite his work.

We met again once in Gainesville when he was attending a Board Meeting of the Florida Ornithological Society, of which he was Charter President. I understand now after visiting the Dry Tortugas why he liked tropical cays and islets. There is only you, the island, and the birds and you can re-calibrate your positions in the cosmos. He wrote in my copy of the Florida check-list "to Rob Norton who also believes there can never be enough Caribbean islands" — a simple, yet profound understanding of people, places, and their systems.

Two things helped bring prominence to the 7th edition of the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list (1998) in species and geographic coverage. They were the relatively cheap travel to the West Indies, for example, along with the cadre of birders and scientists that followed and a recognition that North American species spend from two-thirds to three-quarters of their lives off the breeding territory, a fact Robertson emphasized by his survey of birds on islets off Florida and more than a thousand miles from his home. All these things could have eventually occurred in one form or another, but without Bill Robertson taking chances, leading the way, advising and encouraging others, they would not have happened so soon. Without Bill, there might not have been a West Indies region in *American Birds*, *Field Notes*, or *North American Birds* over the past 20 years. There might not have been supplement updates to Bond's *Birds of the West Indies* or its successor quite so soon.

In the shadows, off-stage in the theater of avian research, are people like Herb Kale, Oscar Owre, George Seaman, Ralph Schreiber, Henry Stevenson, and Claudia Wilds, to name but a few, and now Bill Robertson, who did more than study their favorite birds, travel the globe to bring revelation, or save ecosystems: they inspired by their essence, their en-

thusiasm, and their affection. Those of you who study Sooty Terns will be reminded of Bill and his search for answers when you find a strange bird amidst the colony. It is one of Bill's emissaries encouraging you to continue his quest.

SELECTED LITERATURE

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