

Obituary

JAMES ALLEN KEAST

15 November 1922–8 March 2009

How do you judge a man and his contribution to the world? One way is to wait until his death and sum up the size, grandeur and number of obituaries written and published about him. Most of us will have our departure from life noticed by only a few lines in the classifieds. We might deserve more and our friends and loved ones will no doubt think and remember more of us than is ever said in print, but within the scientific world a life's contribution is judged by more than friends and loved ones. It is this sphere that the obituaries of an individual provide that hard, quantitative and dispassionate assessment of a scientist's life, not just to science, but to humanity.

Pursuing that coldly impassionate measure of worth provided by obituaries, James Allen Keast, or as he preferred 'Allen', obviously made an impact on the world of science, not to mention on those who worked with him and knew him well. Already much has been written about his life, his passions, and his contribution to science. This is just one more testimonial to the effect Allen had on all those who came in contact with him or who have read his published works, but we hope it says as much about the man as about his career.

Both of us followed migratory paths which were the opposite to that of Allen's. Allen was born in Australia, but migrated to North America soon after receiving his doctorate from Harvard University where he was one of the first students of Ernst Mayr. Each of us was born in North America, but migrated to Australia, which oddly enough is where we came to know Allen as a friend and colleague. Each of us works with Australian birds, WB as a palaeontologist, systematist and curator of museum collections and HR as a field ecologist. Allen's interest, passion and research on Australian birds embraced the totality of both our own passions and research. He was the consummate ornithologist and a generalist of the kind often associated with the 19th century: a scientific natural historian. After Allen, few remain and it is unlikely that he will ever be replaced. Each of us found Allen a bottomless source of knowledge and ideas on the Australian avifauna. His experience reached across the continent and embraced more than 75 years of pursuing, studying and writing about Australian birds. We know of almost no one else with this breadth of knowledge and experience and we will always be grateful for Allen's generosity and willingness to share that knowledge with us and everyone else he came in contact with.

If one word is required to sum up an individual's life and contribution, then 'generous' would have to be the word assigned to Allen. James Allen Keast gave generously of his time and knowledge. He was also tireless and passionate about his twin loves of birds and fish. It could be said that in Australia he was an ornithologist. Until finally prevented by ill health, he returned annually to Australia, where he continued to study birds, spending spring and summer days at Ebenezer on the upper Hawkesbury River, just west of Sydney, locating nests, documenting the sequence of songs as each species woke at dawn, and tracking



changes in abundances as the sprawl of Sydney gradually enveloped his beloved woodland. It was always a challenge to locate Allen while he was in Australia. At Ebenezer, he had no phone or at least none we were privy to. Trained as a speed typist in his early teens, Allen was not one to embrace new technology and we never saw him with a mobile phone nor did he abandon his seemingly 19th-century typewriter for a computer. You could always recognise something written by Allen by the distinctive characters of his well-worn typewriter and totally uncorrected typing errors. Allen was not one for wasting time with trivial typos.

Far more important for Allen was to get on with his research, his writing and editing, and his talking about birds. Not one to gossip, Allen had a distracting habit of falling asleep the minute a conversation moved off what he was interested in only to start up, fully awake and in mid-sentence, as soon as the conversation returned to more important matters. One learned to let Allen dominate the conversation and to lead it to the issues of concern to us by judicious questions and brief comment. It was amazing what facts and ideas could be extracted in that way.

Whenever he was in Australia, Allen loved to visit remote locations, where he always insisted on doing some sort of bird research, but we suspiciously believe this was just an excuse to bird-watch. In Australia, Allen also found time to attend whatever

conferences were on offer, especially those dealing with vertebrate wildlife, evolution and biogeography. But we'd be remiss if we left the impression that Allen was only interested in his own research. He avidly followed the research of other bird workers in Australia and it was always challenging to see how he had embraced and developed your own ideas. It was as if he tried to keep one step ahead of the pack and ran that much harder because he was an ocean and a continent away. If you needed constructive and informed comment on anything you were writing, you could rely on Allen providing it and providing it in timely fashion, albeit typed and posted.

There was another side to Allen's time in Australia and that could be described as 'politics'. Not national politics, which he never seemed much interested in, but bird politics. He had a strong interest in the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) and its development as a scientific society. The RAOU, in turn, recognised Allen's contribution to Australian ornithology by making him a fellow in 1960. (He was also a fellow of the American Ornithologists Union.) He contributed generously to the RAOU, endowing a postgraduate student award (Professor Allen Keast Research Award) and providing funds for other purposes, including initiating the prestigious Serventy Medal in honour of one of his own mentors from his youth in Sydney, Dom Serventy. Allen himself was honoured as a Serventy medallist in 1995 for his outstanding contributions to Australian ornithology (*Emu* 95: 301). His financial generosity was not confined to the RAOU. Allen also gave to the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Sydney (where he had studied as an undergraduate after the War) towards the establishment of a visiting lecturer in conservation biology. Allen provided similar support to students at Queens University, Kingston, Ontario where he spent most of his professional life as a member of staff.

Allen's 'bird politics' went further than financial support. Allen passionately opposed many of the changes made within the RAOU, including many of the changes to the English language names of Australian birds. He especially resented replacing 'warbler' with 'gerygone', and changing the name of the much beloved 'Superb Blue Wren' (*Malurus cyaneus*) of his youth to the modernised replacement, 'Superb Fairy-wren'. Even on his last visits to Australia, Allen complained about the nonsense of these changes, echoing his strong written opposition to the newly proposed English language name changes some 30 years earlier. Allen also opposed the adoption of 'Birds Australia' as the new name and face of the RAOU and with HFR argued strongly against the change when it was voted on at a RAOU general meeting in Albany, Western Australia, in 1996. Allen was opposed to the name change because he saw it as shifting the society away from scientific ornithology to an organisation with too great an involvement in bird-watching.

Not that Allen objected to bird-watching. At the age of six, he was catching the train alone to go wandering through the bush. Even in these early years, he made observations on birds and the flowering times of local plants, jotting those down in his notebooks. His youth and early involvement with ornithology in Sydney was very much as part of the local bird-watching fraternity. But as documented in his account of half a century of change in the Sydney avifauna (Keast, A. (1995). Habitat loss and species loss: the birds of Sydney 50 years ago and now.

Australian Zoologist 30(1), 3–25), bird-watching (and bird-watchers) in Sydney before the War was a very different, and much more scientific, activity than it is today. In those days of Keast's youth, the amateurs, people like Alex Chisolm, Michael Sharland and Keith Hindwood, worked hand in hand with research ornithologists, like Tom Iredale and Dom Serventy, and made enduring contributions to our knowledge of the biology of Australian birds. Allen's first published paper (1943) resulted from a visit to the Five Islands at the invitation of the ecologist Consett Davis. Allen just felt that Australia, like North America and England, needed a professionally-based ornithological society. To his credit, the shift to Birds Australia never caused him to stop his support, nor his politicking for more science in national ornithology.

A major step in the development of his career was the relationship he formed with the curators at the Australian Museum, Sydney, while in his late teens. Subsequently, when the Museum was recruiting trainees to work during holidays while engaged in full-time study at university, Allen was one of the first two recruits, starting in 1947. When he graduated from the University of Sydney with his first class honours degree in zoology, he was appointed Assistant Curator of Birds and Reptiles. After receiving his PhD from Harvard in 1955, he was elevated to full Curator.

Allen was very productive during his time at the Museum, publishing a number of papers examining geographic variation in different groups of Australian birds and the factors that promoted their differentiation, including the influence on avian distributions in Australia of seasonal movements, feeding ecology, and geographic and climatic factors, in particular the roles of geographical barriers and refuges. In conjunction with the last, he proposed an evolutionary model to explain the origins of eastern and western species within a group. These various aspects were synthesised in his paper, 'Bird Speciation on the Australian Continent' (1961, *Bulletin of the Museum of Comparative Zoology*, 123(8), 303–495), one of the keystone works in Australian biogeography in general and avian evolution in particular, laying the baseline on which future studies by other workers were built. In his career, Allen wrote papers or edited volumes on functional morphology, communities, biogeography, migration, systematics, ecology, behaviour and vocalisations of birds.

A chance meeting took Allen to Queen's University, but when offered the opportunity, he took an appointment as Assistant Professor in Biology in 1962. In what had been intended as a stay of a few months, his stay at Queen's extended to many years until his retirement as Professor Emeritus in 1989. Almost all of Allen's research in North America was on small fish in Canadian lakes, especially his cherished Lake Opinicon. Allen had a cabin at the Queen's University field station at the lake and, as at Ebenezer, he much delighted in tracking the annual migrations and cycles of the local birds; but otherwise his Canadian research and that of his many students was on fish and lakes. Allen's departure from Australia was an early example of Australia's problem in keeping its best and brightest (the 'brain drain syndrome'). Allen confided that, despite having been made a full Curator, he felt his achievements in obtaining a PhD at Harvard and his pioneering research on birds had not received the recognition it merited after he returned to Museum. Canada's gain was Australia's loss.



Allen Keast (centre standing) and other members of the Sydney birding fraternity at Round Swamp, 1952.

There is much that can be said about James Allen Keast. His appearance alone was memorable: he was a tall, gangly, fair-skinned man with blonde-auburn hair and given to be serious. To us he was a dear friend and colleague. We could go on with endless detail, but readers will have no trouble in finding additional testimonials to the remarkable life and achievements of Allen Keast and an autobiography is in the archives of the Australian Museum, Sydney. We will therefore close and there are no better words than those of Raleigh Robertson and Paul Martin, Allen's colleagues at Queen's University in Canada, who wrote shortly after his death:

In many ways, Allen Keast was larger than life—a generous, passionate, and dedicated biologist with a charm and personality that were both unique and memorable. He will be greatly missed by many friends and colleagues.

Walter E. Boles
Harry F. Recher
Sydney