

D.L. Serventy Medal 1995: Citation

JAMES ALLEN KEAST

Since turning 70 in 1992, Allen Keast has published four papers on vocalisation, two on foraging behaviour, one on morphological adaptation and one on seasonal movements of Australasian birds. He has also edited a book on Pacific biogeography. This output is symptomatic of his extremely rich and extraordinarily diverse contribution to our knowledge of Australian birds. His continuing energy, stimulating thought and productivity has provided inspiration for many past and present Australian ornithologists.

Prior to the initial work of Professor Keast, the taxonomy and systematics of Australian birds was literally a lifeless field, restricted to museum curators tiresomely detailing morphological differences between birds in museum collections. He radically changed our thinking by combining his detailed field observations with meticulous studies on morphological variation to meld a powerful vision of the origins of Australian birds and ways in which they have adapted to their environment. Typically, his contribution covered a very wide range of bird taxa, including work on orioles, white-faces, bristlebirds, emu-wrens, kingfishers, treecreepers, grass-wrens, flycatchers, cuckoo-shrikes, weebills, chats, mistletoebirds, wood-swallows, finches, whipbirds, silver-eyes, honeyeaters, scrubwrens and acanthizid warblers. He collated much of this research in influential major reviews on the biogeography of Australian birds in 1959 and 1981, developing an evolutionary perspective now largely taken for granted.

Interwoven with the previous theme, Allen has examined environmental factors that mould the ecology of Australian birds, including the impact of drought and food availability on reproductive ecology, abundance, moult, competitive interactions and seasonal movements. Perhaps the most notable of his contributions in this field has been his seminal 50-page work on seasonal movements of Australian honeyeaters and their ecological significance, published in 1968. In deriving his broad perspective, he travelled widely across Australia, studying birds in the tropical north, arid centre, Tasmania, south-western and eastern Australia.

Professor Keast has never been parochial in his work, often presenting Australian bird ecology to an international audience. His global vision is exemplified by a series of articles comparing Australian birds and their evolutionary ecology to those of other continents. The most notable examples include his editing of the original (1959) and subsequent (1981) volumes on *Ecological Biogeography of Australia*; numerous papers presented on Australian birds at international meetings; sections on Australian birds in *A New*

Dictionary of Birds; and editing a volume on the biogeography and ecology of the world's forest bird communities (to

which he contributed a chapter on Australian forest birds). For many decades, he has tirelessly promoted Australian birds, expressing his enthusiasm for them to the very many international agencies and organisations he has been associated with.

Allen Keast was one of the first people to point out the consequences of habitat fragmentation to Australian bird ecology. Much of his research has profound and explicit conservation significance. The volume on the conservation and ecology of birds of eucalypt forests (arising from an RAOU congress) of which he was senior editor, has been a major resource tool for the management and conservation of Australian forests and their avifauna. He has also examined other factors influencing the conservation of Australian birds, including drought and fire.

Professor Keast initiated the first natural history series on Australian TV, presenting a 15 minute segment from 1958 to 1960, sliced between a five minute religious message and the *Mickey Mouse Club*. Subsequently, he played a major role in public education about wildlife issues, extensively writing popular articles and lecturing. He wrote a popular Australian bird book (*Bush Birds*) in 1960, and has written popular natural history books. He has also been a stimulating and interested mentor to many students of Australian birds.

Allen has been a member of the RAOU for many decades and is now its longest-serving Fellow (elected 1960). He has been a major contributor to this journal and has attended many of the RAOU's congresses and camp-outs. At the latter he is notable for his enthusiasm, his enviable continuing energy, his encouragement of younger researchers and his extraordinary ability to recount 50 years of Australian bird studies.

Professor Keast's contribution to the manner in which we think about Australian birds and how they have been presented internationally is incalculable. His unmatched and extraordinary commitment and productivity over five decades well deserves recognition through the award of the 1995 Serventy Medal.

Prepared by John Woinarski

