

In Memoriam



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IN MEMORIAM: G. STUART KEITH, 1931–2003

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Stuart Keith, one of the most productive birders in the world, a founder and first president of the American Birding Association, and a co-editor of the *Birds of Africa* series, died on the island of Chuuk (Truk) in Micronesia. He passed away as he had said he wanted to—on a birding trip, having seen a new life bird (the Caroline Islands Ground-dove). He went snorkeling the morning of 13 February 2003; that afternoon, he died of a stroke. He was 71 years old.

George Stuart Keith was born in Clothall, England, near Baldock in Hertfordshire, on 4 September 1931. Early in World War II, his mother and her four children moved to Toronto, Ontario. In 1943, Stuart returned alone to England to attend Marlborough College—where he became the top classical scholar—and Oxford University's Worcester College, graduating with honors and an M.A. in Classics. Between school and Oxford, he was called up into the British Army, commissioned into the King's Own Scottish Borderers, and served as a lieutenant in the Korean War.

In 1945, after Stuart's family had returned to England, his sister Annabel began observing birds and their nesting habits in the garden at Clothall. Stuart soon began to watch birds with her, and he quickly focused on their vocalizations.

In the fall of 1955, he returned to North America. In 1956, he and his brother, Anthony, set out on a birding tour of the United States and Canada, intent on topping Roger Tory Peterson's 1953 record for number of birds seen in a calendar year. Stuart surpassed that record, and in later years was featured in *People Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker* and *Bird Watcher's Digest*, where he was called the "birdwatcher superstar" and the "Babe Ruth of listers."

In the 1950s, he briefly pursued a career in finance; but in 1958 he followed his inclination and became a Research Associate in the Department of Ornithology in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, a post he held for the rest of his life.

In the 1960s, Stuart traveled to Japan, where he produced a film on cranes, and to Madagascar, East Africa, and South Africa, where he recorded bird calls and songs. While in East Africa, Stuart was accompanied by his first wife, Ronalda Whitman, who recorded amphibian calls there. He studied the birds of the Impenetrable Forest in Uganda and the difficult-to-see and poorly known *Sarothrurus* flufftails. He produced a feature-length 35-mm film on African birds that he narrated and showed for the National Audubon Society. With William Gunn, he produced *Birds of the African Rain Forests*, two 12-inch 33-rpm records for the American Museum of Natural History and the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. Those discs of Stuart's recordings were the first to specialize in calls and songs of African forest birds—some 90 species for the first time.

In 1969, Stuart and some of his birding friends founded the American Birding Association (ABA), which today boasts more than 20,000 members. He helped make ABA an organization that birded for fun, but with a scientific approach. Stuart suggested that ABA's first newsletter be called *Birding*, the name of the ABA journal today. He served as ABA's first president from 1970 to 1976 and was on its board of directors until 1990. At ABA's 30th anniversary meeting in 1999, he was awarded the association's highest honor, the Ludlow Griscom Award "in appreciation of his vision and leadership in shaping ABA and tireless passion and dedication to the birds of North America."



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(Photograph taken by Sally Keith, August 1997 at Stoke Park, England)

In the 1970s, he became the first person in the world to have seen more than 4,000 species of birds, a birding feat then comparable to the four-minute mile. By the time Stuart died, he had seen more than 6,500 species—that's more than two-thirds of the world's bird species. When he reached 5,420, a life-size cardboard cutout of Stuart holding a bird became part of the Guinness Hall of Records exhibit held in New York City's Empire State Building.

In 1974, Stuart spent several months traveling around the world, adding new species to his life list. When we first met in Ethiopia, I learned of his extensive knowledge of birds, his enthusiasm for ticking off each new bird, and the rigorous standards he met before he counted it. In 1978, Stuart joined the *Birds of Africa* project as a contributing member on its Board of Advisors; after Leslie Brown's death in 1980, he, Hilary Fry, and I became the senior editors. His love of writing and his knowledge of Greek and Latin made Stuart an outstanding editor. He had an exceptional eye for detail and accuracy. He restructured other authors' contributions into clear, straightforward, to-the-point accounts. For his own contributions, he chose the difficult bulbuls in volume 4 and the cisticolas in volume 5. He kept a vigilant eye on the field-characters and vocalizations sections and prepared most of them for volumes 6 and 7. He skillfully explained how to distinguish a species in the field from others it might be confused with, and related bird calls and songs in refreshingly clear phrases and in syllables based on English pronunciation. Early in the project, he promoted acknowledging people who tape-recorded African bird calls and songs. Because of this, volumes 2 through 7 include an acoustics section. With his eye for the "gizz" and colors of bird illustrations, he contributed significantly to the high quality of Martin Woodcock's color plates for the *Birds of Africa* series. Stuart had completed all of his editing and writing for volume 7 before his death and was looking forward to reading the final proofs.

In 1980, Stuart co-authored, with John Gooders, the *Collins Bird Guide*, a photographic guide to the birds of Britain and Europe. In addition to this book and the *Birds of Africa* volumes, Stuart published more than 50 articles, many scientific, but also light, humorous pieces on birding. He described or co-described five new subspecies, and two others were named in his honor.

From 1965 to 1973, Stuart served as Secretary, then President, of the U.S. Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation. In 1993 he received the Linnaean Society of New York's Eisenmann Medal "for excellence in ornithology and encouragement of the amateur." He joined the AOU in 1959; he became an Elective Member in 1970 and a Fellow in 1991.

Sallyann Burgess, whom he married in 1975, wrote that Stuart "became a very zealous American citizen in 1994, proud to be voting for the first time in 1996." His strongly held beliefs and true sense of pride were evident in everything he did. He was witty and had a great sense of humor. A keen pianist, Stuart played his piano most evenings. He loved both classical and country music. Excellent at word games, he worked crossword puzzles daily. He loved art, history, and geography. And croquet was his game—he was a determined player!

Annabel, his sister, wrote of Stuart's exceptional ability to recognize the song and voice of "the smallest, timid bird in the deepest of underbrush." Mary LeCroy, his colleague at the American Museum of Natural History, wrote how "several of us were eating our sandwiches and socializing in Stuart's office, when suddenly Stuart shouted 'That's an *Agapornis*,' jumped up, and ran to the window. He had recognized the rather nondescript squawk of an African parrot mixed in among Starlings and House Sparrows making noise outside, all the while eating his lunch and carrying on conversation!"

Stuart loved birds, butterflies, dogs, and coral fish. He enjoyed the outdoors, and always had fun traveling and seeking out the most elusive of birds. As a teenager he sought them out while riding his bicycle, often ignoring traffic as he swerved to see a bird. Years later, when I thought I had heard a Painted Bunting, Stuart jumped from our car in Augusta, Georgia, and ran into the swamp in pursuit.

During the last several years of his life, Stuart was plagued with heart disease and other ailments that gave him considerable pain and impairment. Despite this, I recall in New Zealand at the International Ornithological Congress how determinedly he walked to see the Black Stilt, a new life bird for him.

Stuart took pleasure in "turning on" others to the love of birding, and on birding trips he patiently ensured that no one missed any bird he saw. Early in his career, he led trips to Africa,

including cruises along the Nile. Between 1988 and 2003, despite health problems, he led trips to Kenya, New Zealand, Costa Rica, Ghana, Namibia, South Africa, Morocco, Spain, and Micronesia, his final birding tour.

Stuart had some "close encounters." He barely escaped a mortar bomb in Korea, a fur seal in the Pribilof Islands in Alaska, a Land Rover rollover in Madagascar, a bushmaster snake in Panama, and being pinned beneath a raft with heavy penguin crates near Gough Island in the south Atlantic. He lived a "charmed" life.

Stuart will be remembered as an ornithologist with a vast knowledge of birds, as an extraordinary and competitive birder who loved the game of listing, and as a scholar and patient teacher who loved to introduce the joy

of birding to others. I will always remember his strong principles and high standards, which contributed so much to the success of the *Birds of Africa* project.

Stuart is survived by his sister, Annabel Berretti; two brothers, Anthony and Peter; and his wife Sally, ever with him at home in Ramsey, New Jersey, or later in Redding, California, or traveling in various parts of the world to share his love of birds and life.

I thank Sallyann Keith, Annabel Berretti, Anthony Keith, Lois Urban, Mary LeCroy, Dale Zimmerman, Norbert Bahr, Bob Dowsett, Roger Farrand, Hilary Fry, Paul Green, Doug Pratt, Andy Richford, and Martin Woodcock, for their input.