

## In Memoriam: Nicholas E. Collias, 1914–2010

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Source: The Auk, 128(1) : 180-181

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/auk.2011.128.1.180>

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## *In Memoriam*

*The Auk* 128(1):180–181, 2011  
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Printed in USA.

### IN MEMORIAM: NICHOLAS E. COLLIAS, 1914–2010

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Nicholas E. Collias, 1914–2010

(Somewhere in Kenya, holding a weaver bird's nest, probably in the early 1970s. Photographer unknown.)

Nicholas (Nick) Collias, an AOU member (1933), Elective Member (1950), Fellow (1963), and Life Member, died on 28 April 2010 at age 95 in Van Nuys, California. Nick was born on 19 July 1914 in Chicago Heights, Illinois, into a sizable extended family of Greek descent. His parents came to the United States from Greece in 1900 (his father) and 1911 (his mother). As was traditional at that time, their marriage was arranged. His father developed a business running a combination hotel, restaurant, and bar; his mother was a homemaker. Nick was the fourth of their six children, five boys and a girl. His early life was not easy. His oldest brother and his sister both died very young, under difficult circumstances. The loss of his younger sister devastated his mother. She began to deteriorate and contracted tuberculosis. She died in a sanatorium in

1925, when Nick was 11 years old. His father, unable to cope, lost the business and then their home. The family disintegrated.

Two sets of relatives took the boys in, one separately, and Nick as one of three with the other. An aunt arranged for Nick and two of his brothers to enter Glenwood Manual Training School, a boarding school in northern Illinois for boys without families. Glenwood was run like a highly regimented military academy. Everything was geared toward discipline and the mastering of a trade, and Nick spent 4 years at Glenwood learning to become a machinist. In those days, once a boy turned 14 or 15, he was expected to support himself.

Nick hated that life—he said it felt like slavery. He knew that unless he could get more education he would end up in a lifetime

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of factory work. He also quickly learned that it was a world where a boy's life and privileges were largely determined by his size. Nick and his best friend, the two smallest in the class, had to prove themselves physically. They did that by teaming up on the "alpha males" and established their own dominance over the bullies. These experiences gave Nick, a gentle man, an edge of toughness.

Nick's interest in birds developed spontaneously when he was very young and outdoors. He was an active birdwatcher while at Glenwood. The school did not appreciate his excursions looking for birds and often punished him for those activities. He described the punishments as "creative." He persisted.

After public high school in northwestern Chicago, Nick was admitted to the University of Chicago, where he majored in zoology and earned his B.S. in 1937. While there, he maintained his physical condition through athletics. He was tops in his weight class on the university wrestling team, earned five letters for wrestling and diving, and was the captain and quarterback of the junior football team. As an undergraduate he developed a relationship with the ecologist W. C. Allee. Allee hired him as a research assistant after graduation to study pecking order in chickens. This job led to several fellowships and a dissertation (Ph.D., 1942).

Soon after his doctoral work was finished, Nick was drafted into the U.S. Army. He rose in rank from private to first lieutenant. He finished his army career in 1946 as a medical research physiologist at the Aeromedical Research Station, Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio. After discharge, he became a zoology instructor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and it was there that he began his long-term research program on the development of social behavior in birds.

While at Wisconsin, Nick met Elsie Cole, who became his close life and scientific research partner. They married on 21 December 1948. Elsie died on 17 December 2006, four days before their 58th anniversary. Most professional colleagues and acquaintances knew them as "Nick and Elsie." From the time they became a couple, Elsie played major roles in almost all of Nick's research projects and publications, whether or not she was listed as co-author.

The broad outlines of Nick's research career were reflections of his general approach to life. He worked on questions that were interesting and important, and these were often of practical significance. He was steady, consistent, persistent, solid, and worked to achieve the highest standards of quality. In 1939, at age 25, he began publishing research articles that were carefully crafted, well-written reports of original studies. He published an average of one or two papers per year (occasionally as many as five in a year) until 2004, a span of 65 years and a total of 96 research articles. This output was augmented by three substantial books, a set of recordings of animal sounds (both zoo and farm animals) in three formats—a long-playing record (1954), an audiocassette (1992), and a compact disc audiobook (2003)—and five scientific documentary films made between 1965 and 1987.

Most of Nick's publications dealt with a range of aspects of bird behavior, but a few dealt with mammalian behavior. His overall approach was strongly grounded in both natural history and evolution, and he is best known for work that includes social hierarchies, notably pecking orders in birds; vocal communications among birds and mammals (he was a pioneer in the careful application of sound spectrogram technology); and external constructions by animals, notably bird nests. His work was thorough, detailed, painstaking, and highly original. He and Elsie were

intrepid field biologists, making multiple extended expeditions over the years to Africa, Central and South America, southern and southeastern Asia, Australia, and some Pacific islands, in addition to many parts of North America. He was also an experimentalist. He maintained a variety of birds in aviaries at various times and often conducted behavioral experiments to test specific hypotheses. He had a strong analytical and statistical background that he applied consistently.

Nick was an effective educator. From 1954 to 1958, he was a faculty member at Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois. He left to join the Department of Zoology (currently Ecology and Evolutionary Biology) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He quickly earned tenure and became a central figure in both the undergraduate and graduate teaching programs in animal behavior and vertebrate biology. He was an active faculty member for 27 years, until his retirement in 1985. He retired as professor emeritus. While at UCLA he supervised 50 graduate students and 12 doctoral students, and he served as a member of numerous doctoral advisory committees for graduate students whose dissertations included aspects of animal behavior. He had 20 research assistants, many of whom were also students.

He was quite active in professional and scientific societies. In the AOU he was a member of the editorial board for *The Auk*, and for several years he chaired the Awards Committee that was responsible for the nominations of candidates for the Brewster and Coues awards. He was a long-time member of both the American Society of Zoologists (now the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology [SICB]) and the Ecological Society of America (ESA). In 1963, he chaired divisions of each of these societies (Animal Behavior in SICB, Sociobiology in ESA). These organizational positions involved him in discussions that resulted in his being a founding member of the Animal Behavior Society (ABS; 1964). In 1964 and 1965, he chaired the committee that wrote the constitution for the ABS, and he chaired the first two nominating committees for officers. He was elected a Fellow of ABS in 1967.

Other society affiliations included the American Association for the Advancement of Science (Fellow, 1977) and the Cooper Ornithological Society (Honorary Member, 1981). He chaired the Council of the Cooper Society for two years, and for several years he chaired the committee that nominated honorary members. He held the status of honorary research associate in multiple institutions. These included the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History; the Percy Fitzpatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Capetown, South Africa; and the Nairobi (Kenya) Museum of Natural History.

The quality of Nick's professional work has been recognized often. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Chicago (1937). He received several fellowships as both a graduate student and postdoctoral research scholar. He was a Guggenheim Fellow (1962–1963). He and Elsie received jointly the Avy Award of the American Federation of Aviculture (1977); the Elliott Coues Award (AOU; 1980); and the Margaret Morse Nice Medal (Wilson Ornithological Society; 1987). The ABS designated him a Distinguished Animal Behaviorist (2000).

Nick and Elsie are survived by their daughter, Karen C. Whilden. (Editor's note: Karen has been very helpful in contributing to the research for both Nick's and Elsie's memorials. Along with personal reminiscences, she has provided unpublished notes, records, and photographs. The author and I are in her debt).