

## **In Memoriam: Robert Winthrop Storer, 1914–2008**

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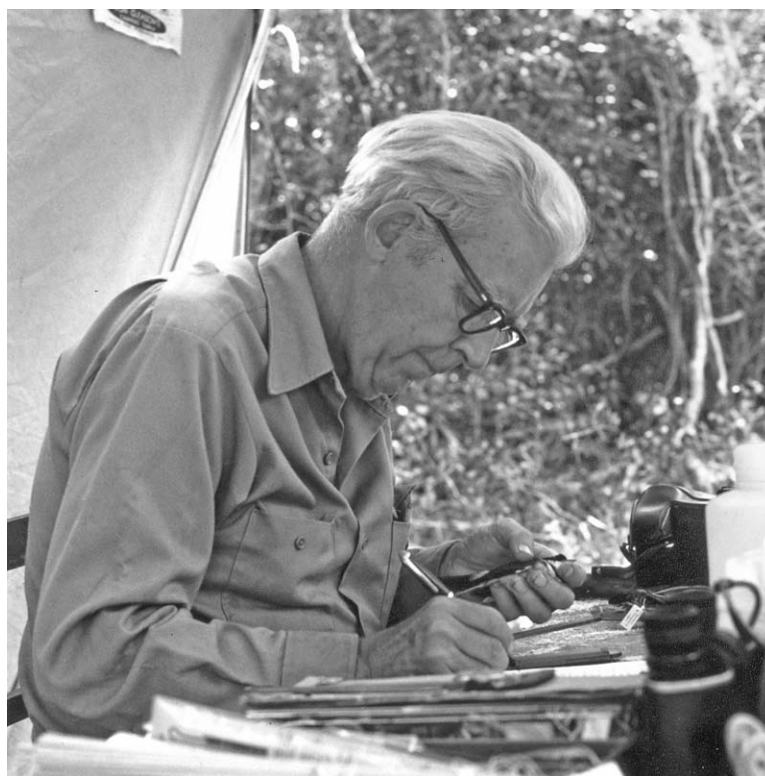
## *In Memoriam*

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### IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT WINTHROP STORER, 1914–2008

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Robert W. Storer, 1914–2008

(Conducting field work on crakes in Paraguay in 1979. Photograph courtesy of Philip Myers III.)

Robert W. Storer, member of the AOU for 73 years, Fellow and Past President (1970–1972), died at age 94 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on 14 December 2008. A meticulous scholar, known for his studies of grebes and other diving birds, Bob was among the most eminent American ornithologists of the 20th century and played a major role in the academic excellence of the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology (UMMZ) for more than four decades.

Bob was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 20 September 1914—the day after World War I began. The family soon moved to northern New Jersey, where his father worked for an engineering firm. Shortly after the war, the family bought a summer cottage at Mantoloking on the then-undeveloped New Jersey shore, where his mother, a trained teacher, encouraged Bob's interests in sea life, birds, butterflies, and particularly caterpillars, which

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he took home to observe their metamorphosis. When he was 10, his mother died in childbirth. His only siblings were the sister, who survived, and a half-brother from his father's remarriage. His experiences at the shore provided the grist for his earliest publications (Auk 1937, 1940). He also became a strong swimmer and enthusiastically swam daily well into his eighties.

At Princeton University, Bob majored in chemistry and considered a career in marine biology, but a seminar with Charles H. Rogers in each of his four years crystallized his interest in ornithology and led to graduate work at the University of California, Berkeley. His dissertation (1949, under Alden H. Miller), *A Comparison of Variation, Behavior, and Evolution in the Sea Bird genera Uria and Cephus*, showcased his ability to integrate anatomy, evolution, paleontology, geographic variation, and behavior into a major taxonomic revision. Through his early years, Bob was quite shy. As the story goes, he became so nervous during his oral exams that Miller called a halt, led Bob to a restaurant, bought him dinner and a glass of wine, and continued the exam, successfully, at the table. Bob never forgot that kindness, which later typified the concern that he and wife, Louise, showed for his students and their families.

Even before completing his degree requirements, Bob was hired as an Instructor in the Department of Zoology at The ("always capitalized") University of Michigan and Assistant Curator of Birds in the UMMZ. He never left, and he became Curator in 1956, Professor in 1963, and Director of the UMMZ from 1979 to 1982. As a curator he had few peers. At the time of his retirement in 1985, the skeleton collection ranked fourth in the world, with over 19,000 specimens of 3,300 species, and the skin collection fifth in the United States, second among university museums only to the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California, Berkeley.

During his first years at Michigan, Bob labored in the shadow of Josselyn Van Tyne, whose dominant and territorial personality (and 6'7" frame) fit poorly with Bob's reserved mien. The two settled into a distant relationship, which meant that Bob usually worked in his office, with little outside contact. He had attracted only one doctoral student, Peter Stettenheim, but when Van Tyne died suddenly in 1957 the clouds parted, and the next morning Oscar T. Owre and Richard L. Zusi appeared at his door. Subsequently, Bob chaired the doctoral committees of 22 students (including two Brewster Medalists) and served on dozens more. His pairings with Harrison B. Tordoff (1957–1970) and Robert B. Payne (1971 onward) kept the UMMZ in the front ranks of North American ornithology for several decades.

Bob was "always more interested in water birds than dicky birds." Early in his career, he emphasized alcid and loons and wrote a major paper on the evolution of diving birds (*Acta XII Congressus Internationalis Ornithologici*, 1960). His curiosity about grebes began at age 14 with observations of migrants displaying on a lake in New Jersey. It was rekindled three decades later when Frank McKinney showed him around Delta Marsh, Manitoba, in the late 1950s. Bob's first grebe papers soon appeared, including a pioneering effort to use behavior as a guide to unravel phylogeny (*Proceedings XIII International Ornithological Congress*, 1963). He quickly became the foremost grebe specialist of his generation, publishing on anatomy, taxonomy, behavior, molts and plumages, and fossil history. A book on the Podicipedidae, postponed

for retirement, was never completed. That void was filled by Jon Fjeldså's essential *The Grebes* (2004), which Bob warmly endorsed and to which he contributed an introduction and much original information.

In retirement, concerned about decreasing interest in animal biology, he initiated a bimonthly column (1987–1995) in *Birder's World*, intended to bring science to the layman. He lamented that scientists are mostly "writing for a few others . . . using unnecessary jargon, and peppering the text with statistical analyses that would be better left to appendices. Unless we make our papers accessible to a wider audience, we will continue to fail to attract new blood into the field." Concurrently, he continued original research, including co-authorship of four grebe accounts for *Birds of North America*. He published more than 230 papers, perhaps saving the best for last. In two masterly monographs (University of Michigan Museum of Zoology Publications in Zoology 2000, 2003), he insightfully distilled a lifetime of thought about all aspects of natural history to explain how a detailed knowledge of parasites could elucidate the evolutionary history of loons and grebes. These syntheses were praised in *The Auk* and *The Wilson Bulletin* as "unique," "comprehensive," "original," and "obligatory reading . . . for evolutionary biologists."

Bob loved field work and was more adventurous and resourceful in the field than one might have thought. Grebes took him to South America, New Zealand, Australia, Europe, and Madagascar. He planned his work in advance, made local contacts, and was always a gracious guest, which gained him access to areas others might have missed. At Lake Titicaca, he charmed an old woman at afternoon teas, which gained him and Frank Gill access to a motorboat for collecting on the lake. Later, although he had studied grebes around the world, the sight of more than a million Eared Grebes—half the continental population—virtually in his backyard at Mono Lake, California, left him completely amazed.

In addition to his wide-ranging interests in biology (he considered himself a naturalist), Bob had an impressive knowledge of classical and light opera. Saturday afternoons were devoted to broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera (*never* Michigan football). The Da Ponte operas of Mozart, some Wagner, and Gilbert and Sullivan were favorites. The opera *Utopia, Limited* by Gilbert and Sullivan helped inspire the creation of the Katma Award. Discouraged by a general lack of original thinking in recent papers (he called them "lab reports") and the rejection of papers of contrary interpretations by reviewers angered at having their work challenged, Bob presented the Cooper Ornithological Society with a bequest to fund a novel prize to reward ideas "that ran counter current dogma, or settled opinion" (see *Condor* 105:843, 2003). Ergo, and brilliantly, the Katma Award, from the Greek *kat*, meaning "against." In *Utopia, Limited*, "when the king failed to provide the people with all they wanted, it became the duty of the Public Exploder to set off a stick of dynamite under him, at which point the Public Exploder became the next king." In Bob's view, this "despotism tempered by dynamite" was a metaphor for science, in which old ideas are exploded and replaced by new ones. The importance of this award, unique in biology, has yet to be fully appreciated.

Bob was known for expecting thoroughness in his own research and that of his students. His teaching was subtle and Socratic, often delivered over a cup of coffee. He understood that the best research was self-initiated and insisted that students choose

topics of interest to themselves, not the granting agencies or their professors. He will be most remembered for his kindness, generosity, courtesy, genuine interest in students, and respect for others, and for stimulating new interest in grebe biology. Despite his mild manner, he held strong opinions on a few subjects, such as professors who allow students “to make cladistic analyses before they know the basic biology of the organisms they are analyzing.” And his last published paper (*Auk*, 2005) was a critique of the now widely accepted idea that flamingos are the sister group to grebes. He acknowledged the utility of genetic data but regarded it with caution and demanded congruent evidence. In a letter to me, he suggested there ought to be an award for the paper that best synthesizes biological and genetic data.

Bob had a dry wit and was a brilliant crafter of puns, most of which flew unobstructed over the heads of his audiences. On a trip to Saskatchewan, he and Doug Gill were forced to take refuge from a fierce prairie storm. Stymied by wind and weather, the duo passed time pondering collective nouns for various avian taxa (e.g., a murder of crows). The storm did not abate, so they expanded their

efforts to women of easy virtue. The resulting classics—including “a jam of tarts,” “an anthology of pros,” “a pride of loins,” and “an essay of trollops”—eventually found their way into *Playboy*.

In addition to serving as President of the AOU, he was elected to several terms on the Council, edited *The Auk* (1953–1957), was the founding Editor of *Ornithological Monographs*, and was a key member of the Committee on the Classification and Nomenclature of North American Birds for 35 years. He served the Cooper Ornithological Society in many capacities and was elected an Honorary Member. In 1997, he was awarded the Loye and Alden Miller Award for lifetime achievement in ornithological research (*Condor* 99:1026–1027, 1997).

Predeceased by his wife, Louise Shepherd, in 1992, Bob is survived by two sons, Robert, a professor of engineering at Lehigh University, and David, a writer in Harlan, Iowa, and by two grandchildren.

I thank D. Storer, J. Hinshaw, D. Gill, F. Gill, R. Zusi, and J. D. Jehl for contributing recollections, insights, and ideas to this memorial.