

## **In Memoriam: William Henry Belton, 1914–2009**

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## IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM HENRY BELTON, 1914–2009

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William (Bill) Henry Belton, an Elective Member since 1986, passed away at his home in Great Cacapon, West Virginia, on 25 October 2009, at age 95. He was born in Portland, Oregon on 22 May 1914. Following three decades in the U.S. Foreign Service, he began a second career as a self-taught ornithologist, focusing on Latin American ornithology and conservation.

Bill graduated from Stanford University in 1935 with a degree in political science. His summer job was canceled because of funding cuts, but rather than dwell on the loss, he drove south to Latin America, with a friend and \$700 in cash, in a car purchased for \$25. The adventure eventually landed him in Quito, Ecuador, where a temporary clerk job became the start of a career in the U.S. Foreign Service.

In 1943, Bill was posted as an agricultural attaché in Ottawa, Canada. Shortly after he and his wife, Julia, moved into their house, Bill took out his binoculars and bird book to explore. His neighbor came out and introduced himself: Hoyes Lloyd, the then president of the AOU. Later, when Lloyd learned that Bill's next post would be Brazil, he showed Bill how to prepare bird specimens and signed him up for an AOU membership (1946), planting the seeds of a second career.

Bird research became an element of Bill's many international posts. He banded approximately 1,500 birds in the Panama Canal Zone (1963–1964), participated in early mist-netting efforts in Australia, and collected specimens in Brazil, both before and after his retirement from the Foreign Service (1970). His specimens (most prepared by Mr. Lauri Model) were given to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the American Museum of Natural History, the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, and Museu de Ciências Naturais in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Bill retired in 1970 from his final Foreign Service assignment as Deputy Chief of Mission at the American Embassy in Rio de Janeiro. He then moved to Gramado, Brazil, to undertake an extensive survey project on the birds of Rio Grande do Sul, the

southernmost Brazilian state. He canvassed the area thoroughly, spending at least 800 days in the field, sometimes as many as 25 days a month. His work was published in the two-volume *Birds of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil*, in English (1984, 1985) and Portuguese (1994), the first comprehensive explication of the distribution of birds of that state. He also produced, with photos by John Dunning, a pocket guide to Rio Grande do Sul. This guide, known affectionately as the "Belinho," helped inspire a generation of ornithologists, many of whom became leaders in the Brazilian Society of Ornithology. The society honored Bill with the "Premio Ararajuba" in 1994. Bill also translated and updated Helmut Sick's *Ornitologia Brasileira*, published as *Birds in Brazil* (1993), and made over 1,000 sound recordings, now archived at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Bill served on the Board of Directors of the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP) and its Pan-American section, which he chaired from 1980–1986. He was active on the boards of the RARE Center for Tropical Bird Conservation (now called "Rare"), The Nature Conservancy of West Virginia, the American Bird Conservancy (ABC), and several other local conservation and land-trust organizations. The ABC's William Belton Conservation Grant Program has provided numerous grants to Latin American ornithologists. In 1986, the ICBP awarded Bill the Jean Delacour Medal for his service to bird conservation. In 1994, he was designated a Member of Honour by Birdlife International "for distinguished contribution to conservation of wild birds and their habitats worldwide."

He is survived by his second wife, Cory; three children, Timothy Belton, Barbara Yngvesson, and Hugh Belton; seven of his eight grandchildren (including the author, whose career was shaped significantly by Bill's thoughtful mentoring); and a great-grandson. His passion for birds, conservation, learning, and giving will remain an inspiration for his biological and his ornithological families for many years to come.