

In Memoriam: Kenneth Carroll Parkes, 1922–2007

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IN MEMORIAM: KENNETH CARROLL PARKES, 1922–2007

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Kenneth C. Parkes died in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on 16 July 2007, less than a month before his 85th birthday. Although he had retired as Chief Curator of Life Sciences and Curator of Birds at Carnegie Museum of Natural History in 1996, Ken remained active in ornithology until seriously disabled by complications from Parkinson's disease. He is survived by his wife of 53 years, Ellen Pierce Stone; a brother, Philip, of San Francisco, California; and a half-brother, Wright, of Cleveland, Ohio.

A died-in-the-wool New Yorker, Ken was, nevertheless, born in Hackensack, New Jersey, on 8 August 1922. I wondered about this contradictory New Jersey "fact" until Ellen explained that Ken's mother had been visiting relatives there when she went into unexpected early labor. The newborn was carried home soon thereafter and grew up as a true New Yorker. Even after establishing his career in Pittsburgh, Ken returned often, both for professional trips to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and to indulge his love of the city, especially of its musical theater.

Ken attended elementary and high school at the Lincoln School of Teachers' College New York and graduated in 1939. He then went on to Cornell University and received a B.S. in 1943, an M.S. in 1948, and a Ph.D. in 1952. He served in the U.S. Army from April 1943 through February 1946. While Ken was at Cornell, his advisor for both his advanced degrees was Arthur A. Allen, who also trained Ken as curator in the Cornell bird collection from 1947 to 1952. Ken's M.A. thesis was "A Survey of Published Colored Illustrations of North American Birds," and his doctoral dissertation *The Birds of New York State and Their Taxonomy*. Although the latter study was never published in its entirety, parts of it were extracted by Ken for several later papers, and aspects were employed by John Bull for his *Birds of New York State* (1974).

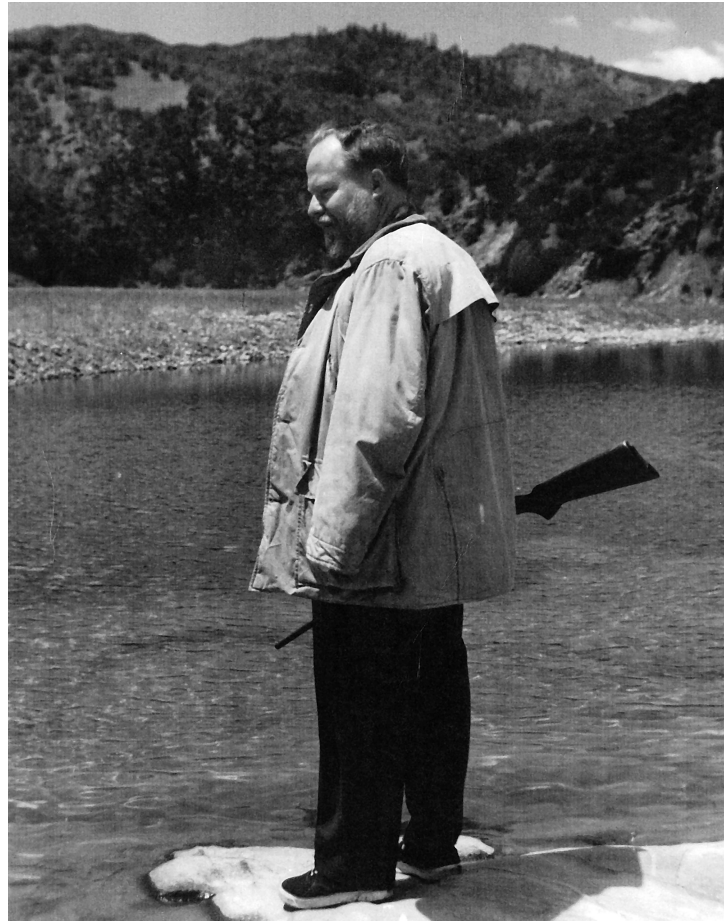
Trained in taxonomic and museum work, Ken insisted that he was incredibly lucky when he was appointed Assistant Curator of Birds at Carnegie Museum in 1953, because in those times paid positions in museums were few and far between. The Carnegie bird collection was founded in 1899 by W. E. Clyde Todd, who built it and remained as primary curator until 1945. Todd was already eight years past retirement age when Ken applied for the position there (Parkes in W. E. Davis, Jr., and J. A. Jackson. 1995. *The History of North American Ornithology*, Memoirs of the Nuttall

Ornithological Club, no. 12, Cambridge, Massachusetts). Mr. Todd later told me that he, too, had felt very fortunate, to find a museum-trained ornithologist who would build on his life's work: a person who would take care of, center his research on, and continue to add to the Carnegie collection. With full appreciation of the value and importance of museum collections, Ken did.

In Pittsburgh, Ken found (virtually inherited) a collection of more than 100,000 study skins, as well as display mounts and a few anatomical specimens. The meticulously curated 9,000 egg sets (with full data, collected before World War II and before the effects of DDT) continued in the care of Mr. Todd, almost literally until the day he died, in 1969. Under Ken's care, by the mid-90s, the number of bird accessions at Carnegie had increased to more than 170,000, predominantly traditional, study skins. Of these, curatorial activity had led to dispersal of about 16,000 through exchanges, gifts, and transfers to educational institutions, and some discards. In addition, there were some 14,500 skeletons, 6,500 alcoholic specimens, and 10,220 egg sets awaiting entry into a new computerized catalogue system. The collection is literally worldwide in representation, with understandable emphasis on the regional interests of past curators and collectors.

After settling in Pittsburgh, Ken expanded his research interests beyond the United States. His first overseas collecting trip was to Luzon, The Philippines, in 1956. In the 1960s, he began to concentrate on filling gaps in Carnegie's rich Neotropical collections. In 1961, he joined Phil Humphrey and Bill Partridge to collect in Argentina. From 1963 through 1981, he collected in eight different parts of Mexico with, variously, Allan R. Phillips, R. W. Dickerman, J. William Hardy, and Joseph R. Jehl, Jr. He also broadened his ornithological horizons with frequent trips to U.S. meetings and international congresses, and by birding vacations, often accompanied by Ellen. Eventually, "peripatetic Parkes" (as we sometimes referred to him) visited 35 different countries. From 1967, Ken also spent parts of many summers at Great Gull Island, New York, with the AMNH tern studies.

Ken's research interests ranged widely within avian systematics and distribution. Most of his taxonomic studies involved the ratites, herons, owls, swallows, hybridization in warblers, and New World nine-primaried oscines in general. While performing



Kenneth C. Parkes, 1922–2007
(Collecting in California. Photograph by John E. duPont.)

routine tasks in the skin collection, Ken always kept an eye out for interesting variations and puzzling specimens. He would then follow up on the skins that didn't quite seem to "fit," researching and sometimes taking the puzzlers to compare in other collections, especially that of the AMNH, where he was a Research Associate. Ken also became interested in, and published on, the origin of feathers and bird flight. His prolific publication list contains approximately 400 titles, a result of his broad interests, strong work ethic, facility in writing and editing, and a penchant for solving problems quickly, as they arose. Ken always said that he "didn't have a big book in him." Instead, he found more satisfaction in the quantity and variety of his publications. This was in contrast to Mr. Todd's record: a few very long-term studies that resulted in big books and rewards of a different sort (such as *two* Brewster Medals.) Ken and Todd were curiously different men, curators to the core and amiable colleagues who respected each other, yet they reached the same professional goal with very different personalities.

Perhaps Ken's best-known contribution to ornithology lay in his study of molts and plumages (P. S. Humphrey and K. C. Parkes. 1959. "An approach to the study of molts and plumages." *Auk* 76:1–31; see also comments in *Auk* 80:496–503, 1963). Although Ken

contributed more to the study, he offered to take the junior authorship because he was established in the profession and Phil was still in his first job. Such generosity was typical of him.

Ken and I first got to know each other when he was spending a lot of time at Yale Peabody Museum, developing the molt study with Humphrey, my thesis advisor. I was working in the collection as a curatorial assistant while completing my degree. Ken told me later that watching what he called my "overdeveloped curatorial gland" in action led to my appointment at Carnegie in 1963, as soon as funding became available. It turned out to be a very happy 18-year association for both of us.

Ken's strong feeling of a personal responsibility for the Carnegie collection was shown in many ways. Between 1973 and 1987, he successfully secured significant funding from the National Science Foundation to support and improve the study and housing of the collection. With limited field funds, Ken also actively sought donated specimens, both locally and from other faunas. He particularly encouraged the public to bring in dead birds they found. We especially welcomed the salvage efforts of people who had the time and interest to search for migratory kills under Pittsburgh towers. Those additions to the collection proved extremely valuable to faunal and anatomical studies.

From his early years, including his Master's degree, Ken maintained an active interest in bird art. He was always willing to lend specimens to artists, particularly young ones, and offered useful criticism of their work. This was especially true for Larry Barth, who first appeared in our office as a local teenager. A woodcarver and painter of birds, Larry had developed an interesting technique: he chewed the ends of individual bits of wood to achieve the look of soft feather-ends and then inserted them into the main bird body. His first major success was of a Great Horned Owl with nestlings, now owned and exhibited by the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania. Larry went on to a very successful career as a carver and has attained many honors, including one-man exhibits at the Smithsonian. Ken, meanwhile, developed a reputation as a bird art critic and enjoyed jurying both small and large shows.

Ken also contributed his time generously to professional associations and memberships in ornithological societies. He was a Life Member of the Wilson Ornithological Society, served two terms on the Executive Council, chaired several other committees, and later held successive vice-presidencies and then the presidency from 1972 to 1975.

A Life Fellow of the AOU, Ken served on more than 12 AOU councils and committees between 1960 and 1988. Most notably, he was a member of the rigorous Check-list Committee from 1966 and served as its Vice-Chairman from 1975 through 1983. He co-chaired an Annual Meeting in 1989 in Pittsburgh. However, his unique, anonymous, and perhaps proudest contribution to the AOU occurred before many Annual Meetings: Ken solicited, wrote parts himself, then assembled and edited issues of "*The Auklet*." This occasional "publication" by the Local Committee and issued during the annual banquet was eagerly awaited. I often heard attendees wondering and hoping that *The Auklet* would fly during that year's banquet. On one occasion, a (now deceased) noted

ornithologist bewailed that despite his many previous honors, he felt he wasn't really a *true* AOU member because he had never been taken off in *The Auklet*. Happily, that night he finally was.

Ken was also a Life Member of the Cooper Ornithological Society; an Elective Council Member, 1974–1976; and a member of the Board of Directors, 1979–1981. He was a Life Member of the Linnaean Society of New York, belonged to the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs (Bibliography Committee, 1955–1996), and served as a Trustee of the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania. For many years, Ken retained his close association with Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology, was a Life Member, and served on its Administrative Board and several committees from 1962 to 1975. He also was a member of the Delaware Museum of Natural History's Board of Directors from its inception in 1976 and served as a Trustee. In addition, Ken belonged to at least 35 other ornithological and conservation organizations; he was a Life Member of some and was sporadically active in others, depending on his research or travel interests at the time. A voracious reader, Ken always brought a brown-bag lunch to work and spent his lunchtime keeping up with the journals that came in that day's mail. The museum's budget being sparse, he also personally bought a great many books to supplement the Section of Birds library.

Ken had a wonderful sense of humor. A workday with him could be truly enjoyable. He also greatly helped me in my professional development, particularly in editing my (and many others') writing until it made a decent manuscript. Additionally, Ken had a large and active circle of friends, both within and outside of ornithology. He was an accomplished raconteur, with an incredible memory for jokes. In all, he was a thoroughly nice guy, outgoing and energetic, and exceptionally kind to friends and associates.

Many thanks to Ellen Parkes, Marilyn Niedermeier, Stephen Rogers, and Robert Mulvihill for help with the post-1980 years in writing this memorial.