

In Memoriam: Keith L. Dixon, 1921–2012

Source: The Condor, 114(3) : 675-676

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1525/cond.2012.114.3.675>

The BioOne Digital Library (<https://bioone.org/>) provides worldwide distribution for more than 580 journals and eBooks from BioOne's community of over 150 nonprofit societies, research institutions, and university presses in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences. The BioOne Digital Library encompasses the flagship aggregation BioOne Complete (<https://bioone.org/subscribe>), the BioOne Complete Archive (<https://bioone.org/archive>), and the BioOne eBooks program offerings ESA eBook Collection (<https://bioone.org/esa-ebooks>) and CSIRO Publishing BioSelect Collection (<https://bioone.org/csiro-ebooks>).

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Digital Library, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Digital Library content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non-commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne is an innovative nonprofit that sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.



IN MEMORIAM: KEITH L. DIXON, 1921–2012

The Condor 114(3):675
© The Cooper Ornithological Society 2012



Keith L. Dixon, born 20 January 1921 in El Centro, California, died at his home in Logan, Utah, on 4 March 2012, after a brief illness. Keith had developed an interest in birds by the time he finished Grossmont Union High School in 1939. Upon graduation he enrolled at San Diego State College (now SDSU), earning an A.B. in zoology in 1943. He entered the U.S. Navy in 1943 and served in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters during World War II. One of his shipmates, who was knowledgeable about birds, encouraged his interest in ornithology. After his discharge from the Navy, Keith commenced his graduate training at the University of California, Berkeley, earning an M.A. in 1948 and a Ph.D. in 1953, both in zoology. While at Berkeley, Keith studied under Alden H. Miller and held positions as a teaching assistant, technician in the

Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, and research assistant. The latter position was at the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory (NARL) in Barrow, Alaska, during the first year of Frank Pitelka's 30-year research program there. (I had the privilege, as a newly minted Ph.D., of participating in the final year of that work at NARL. Both Keith and I were proud to have been there at the beginning and end, respectively, of the Pitelka era of arctic research.)

Keith joined the faculty of the Department of Wildlife Management at Texas A & M College (now Texas A & M University) in 1952. While there he led several expeditions for the college into Mexico. In 1958, he returned to Berkeley as assistant research zoologist at the university's Hastings Natural History Reserve in Carmel Valley. After a year there, he joined the faculty at Utah State University (USU), where he remained until he retired in 1989.

Keith's master's work at Berkeley was on the behavior of the Oak Titmouse (*Baeolophus inornatus*) in California (*Condor* 51:110–136, 1949). His doctoral work was an ecological analysis of the interbreeding of the Tufted (*B. bicolor*) and Black-crested (*B. atricristatus*) titmice in Texas (*University of California Publications in Zoology* 54:125–206, 1955), which continued as a lifelong interest. He wrote me many times after retirement, as recently as 14 months before he died, that he was re-examining the hybrid zone.

As an expert on the behavior of parids, after moving to USU, Keith developed a vigorous research program on the species local to that area, the Black-capped Chickadee (*Poecile atricapillus*) and Mountain Chickadee (*P. gambeli*). This work was well funded by the National Science Foundation for a decade. Keith's bibliography comprises more than 50 publications spanning 44 years (1946–1990). His papers continue to be cited frequently in the parid literature, some more than 50 years after publication. He supervised numerous graduate students and, in keeping with his humble personality, did not take credit as a coauthor unless he was a major contributor to the actual work. The earmark of his publications is their beautifully crafted prose. Keith's lectures had this same quality of crafted exposition, as though they could be transcribed and go straight to press.

Although he was a specialist on the behavior and ecology of the Paridae, Keith was known as an all-around excellent ornithologist. His memory and command of the literature were phenomenal. His graduate students worked on a wide variety of bird species, and he also had several students who worked on small mammals. He supervised at least 13 Ph.D. students, 23 M.Sc. students, and served on countless graduate committees. Keith was proud of his Berkeley roots and membership in the Joseph Grinnell–Alden Miller academic family tree (F. A. Pitelka, *Condor* 95:1065–1067, 1993), as are his students.

Among his professional affiliations, Keith was especially fond of the Cooper Ornithological Society. He served it as assistant editor of the *Condor* (1949–52), member of the board of directors (1970–73), vice president (1972–73), and was awarded the status of honorary member in 1982 for outstanding service to the society. He was a member (1943), elective member (1953), and fellow (1966) of the American Ornithologists' Union and served the Wilson Ornithological Society as editor of the *Wilson Bulletin* (1955–58).

Keith's arrival at USU elevated the status of ornithology and helped make the study of birds a strength of the university. He taught a variety of courses serving the departments of both Biology and Wildlife Science: avian biology, field ornithology, mammalogy, zoogeography, field ecology, comparative vertebrate anatomy, and general biology. He helped develop a team-taught course that was a hit with nonscience majors. Titled "discovering nature," it organized field trips around the chapters in Niko Tinbergen's *Curious Naturalists* (1958, Doubleday, Garden City, NY). Field Ornithology, too, was very popular, at times enrolling over 70 students and requiring all the ornithology graduate students to pitch in and lead small groups on the class field trips. Keith's zoogeography course was one of the core courses in USU's graduate program in ecology. Keith was an anchor of wisdom in the Biology Department and was considered the department's most knowledgeable member on matters of curriculum.

Keith Dixon was the epitome of the distinguished professor—erudite, selfless in working for the good of the institution and his students. He was also one of those professors about whom stories are told wherever graduate students gather. He was legendary. His idiosyncrasies were mostly of the charming variety, and everyone enjoyed reviewing the stories, many of which involved his office. His was not a traditional office, where the occupant could sit and work or hold a private meeting. There wasn't room for that.

Many professors have messy offices, but Keith developed this concept into an art form. The shelves, files, desk, tables, and floor were covered with stacks of books, journals, reprints, and miscellany (I once saw him discover a forgotten study skin of a bat and another time a spirit specimen of some sort under a pile). The waste basket was sometimes employed for storage as well. This led to disaster on at least one occasion when a new janitor emptied the basket. The Dixon strategy was to remove the drawers from the desk and tables, turn them upside down, and insert them part way to increase the surface area for piling. Once the piles got to a certain depth, Keith placed a transparent plastic sheet over them and then piled on the sheets. This went on until the piles were three or four layers deep. Legend had it that Keith knew exactly where everything was in his office. I can verify that he usually could extract the item he was looking for with remarkable accuracy. His office was centrally located next to the main biology office. Stories of the office spread, and sometimes "tourists" from the other side of campus would walk by hoping to catch a glimpse, but the windowless door was rarely open more than a crack. Naïve visitors who chanced to walk by when the door was open sometimes gasped,

thinking there had been a disaster of some sort. Legend has it that the fire marshal once cited Keith's office and threatened to close it and the whole biology department because of the "hazard posed by such a stack of papers in such cramped quarters."

Keith was a thoughtful, considerate, and humble man. He rarely talked about himself or his own work, leaving a certain mystery about him. Everyone liked and respected Keith, but at times people could be frustrated by his idiosyncrasies. For example, the state of his office meant that most meetings with him were "walking meetings," conducted during the search for an empty room. He was a deliberate man, so it often took some time to convince him that an idea was a good one. His lectures were deadpan serious but often punctuated by a raised eyebrow or a wry smile that indicated he had just shared some subtle humor with his audience. His style in supervising graduate students was to be patient and supportive, nudging them along by offering suggestions, not directives. This style (remote control, as one student dubbed it) required graduate students to have initiative. It worked because he had a lot of students, who critiqued and encouraged each other. During my years at USU (1973–1980), I shared the two-person office in the taxidermy lab with four different graduate students, and I recall 14 students who were working toward M.Sc. or Ph.D. degrees under Keith's supervision.

Keith was part of the generation of field biologists who collected specimens and distributional data, studied life histories, and carefully observed behavior. His catalog's collector number (using the Grinnell system for field notebooks, of course) reflected over 2000 specimens prepared. He knew his birds personally. Legend had it that Mountain Chickadees would line up when he drove into the parking lot at Beaver Mountain Ski Resort, then fly through the open window into his vehicle for processing. I didn't see that myself, but I did see his birds land on his snowshoes during observations.

In addition to his ornithological interests, Keith especially enjoyed classical music and track and field (he was a high jumper in high school and college). When I contacted colleagues and friends after Keith's death, they described him as easy to like, even-tempered, humble, kind, mild-mannered, respectful, sweet, and thoughtful. To sum up, Keith Dixon represented professional ornithology at the highest level. And he was a sweet guy.

Keith met his wife, Martha, while working on his master's degree at Berkeley. Martha, who earned a Ph.D. in colonial American history at the University of Utah and worked as an editor and writer for the *Herald Journal* newspaper in Logan, passed away in 2010. They are survived by their daughter, Melissa Dixon, a former professional violinist who recently retired from a second career in the health-care industry.

I thank Fritz Knopf, Dennis Martin, Gary Ritchison, Jim Gessaman, Bill Brindley, Kimberly Smith, Amy Croft, and especially Melissa Dixon for their help in preparing this memorial. A brief obituary by the American Ornithologists' Union Committee on Memorials appeared earlier (*Auk* 129:357, 2012).—TEX A. SORDAHL, Department of Biology, Luther College, Decorah, IA 52101.