

## In Memoriam

### **ROBERT ALLEN NORRIS (1922-2010)**

Georgia has lost one of its most dedicated senior naturalists. Robert (Bob, Bobby) was born in Waycross, Georgia on 26 December 1922. Early on he showed a strong sense of inquiry when he and Hamp Mizell, two teenagers, started to hike across the Okefinokee Swamp, but were caught and sent home. An artistic nature was another trait with which Bob was born. We all marvel on his early sketches (some reproduced in the *Oriole* 1939) and later watercolors, his field notes, and letters—all beautifully executed in his trademark penmanship.

Trudging through fields, woods, and lakesides near Fitzgerald, Bob found early companionship with Buddy Hopkins, with whom a close relationship lasted more than half a century. Their experiences are legendary and often unbelievable. Together and separately they added many notable bird records for central and south Georgia.

I first met Bob about 1940 at a Boy Scout camp near Atlanta where he was counselor for Bird Study merit badge. He was a fine, patient teacher, helping me learn key points for bird identification.

After serving in the Navy during WW II, he enrolled in the University of Georgia at Athens where he became one of Professor Eugene P. Odum's students. Bob's MS thesis focused on the birds of southwestern Georgia. Then, he attended the University of California at Berkeley where his major professor was the renowned Dr. Alden H. Miller. Bob jokingly referred to his doctoral dissertation as "A Tale of Two Sittas," referring to his study of the life histories of two nuthatch species.

He held several academic posts in the 1950s and 1960s (Tulane, Rutgers, Valdosta State) but the crowds and regulations of academia did not suit his persona, so he turned to the

challenges provided by field studies. For several years he worked at the AEC Savannah River Plant (SRP) with a small team of field ecologists under the direction of Dr. Eugene Odom. That experience led to his publication on birds of the area and the prestigious and oldest Ecological Society of America's Mercer Award (1961) for his research paper on "Density, racial composition, sociality, and selective predation in nonbreeding populations of Savannah sparrows." In the early 1960s he was attracted to the increased number of migrants killed at the TV tower near the Tall Timbers Research Station. There he was hired as an assistant to Herbert Stoddard for the preparation and cataloging of tower casualties, which also led to significant publications.

With an ever-inquiring and inventive mind, at a blood bank in California, he pioneered in a study of avian blood groups to show possible taxonomic relationships among birds. Later he scaled a tall TV tower and set up a mist net to determine how high night migrants fly. Under a microscope he counted the number of barbs on a tail feather to determine the age of a Pine Warbler. To capture and color-mark a nuthatch leaving its high nesting hole, he used a women's stocking tied to a tall pole.

The nature of his scholarly research has been evident through many publications (notes, monographs, field studies) for nearly 50 years. His field studies of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and subspecies of Savannah Sparrows proved to be quite important to subsequent research.

Over the years his attention was gradually drawn to the identification and distribution of plants in southern Georgia. He shared much of his knowledge with students and other investigators. The culmination of his studies was an extensive herbarium (nearly 10,000 specimens) and relevant research documents. They have been donated to Georgia Southwestern

State University at Americus.

Although sometimes described as shy, reserved or quiet, his compassion for nature and people was deep and convincing. In 1996 he wrote to Buddy Hopkins, “I don’t mind being called an old stick-in-the-mud as long as that mud contains interesting emergent plants—and birds are singing nearby.” How fitting it was that the life of this intellectual, gentle man should end on 5 September 2010 as he purchased food for his beloved cats. He will be greatly missed for years to come.—David W. Johnston