

## Allen Keast (1922-2009)



Photo:  
Australian Museum, AM2 287/14/11

With the recent passing of Allen Keast the Australian ornithological community has lost a valuable and truly committed member.

Allen Keast was one of three children of Mary (nee Campbell) and James Keast. Although he lived in Rockdale, in southern Sydney, with his parents, it is clear that his introduction to nature was at his grandparent's house in Wahroonga, in the leafy north shore of Sydney. He would go alone on the train from the age of six, a trip that these days would send shudders up the spine of any parent.

It was a childhood filled with bird-watching, egg-collecting, as was the fashion then, and wildlife photography. By age 16, he had left school and worked with the Road Transport Commission in Sydney, completing his High School studies at night. He was making many valuable contacts in the Zoological Society of Sydney.

He was also taken under the wing by the curators of the Australian Museum, which he was constantly visiting. But it was an invitation by Consett Davis from the University of New England, to visit Five Islands off the coast at Port Kembla that gained him a mentor, a friend, and ultimately his first published scientific paper in *Emu*, on the Birds of the Five Islands. It was also his introduction to the multi-variate world of ecological studies.

1939 saw him join the army, and despite a minor heart problem that kept him out of the front line, he wangled postings to New Guinea and New Britain, which thrilled him with its tropical fauna and flora.

After being de-mobbed, he studied Zoology at Sydney University, gaining a BSc (Hons - 1st class) and a Masters degree, and then landed his dream job as an Assistant Curator at the Australian Museum. Memorable was taking part in a multi-disciplinary expedition around Australia in 1952 – west from Sydney out to Uluru, up through the Tanami, the Kimberleys,

Darwin, Western Queensland and Cape York – a mammoth trip for the fifties, and even now not an easy one.

1953 brought a Saltonstall Fellowship and a Fullbright Travel Grant, and the start of a PhD at Harvard, one of the first supervised by Ernst Mayr, the great evolutionary biologist. With a PhD under his belt, he returned to the Australian Museum as Curator of birds, amphibians and reptiles. In 1962, a chance meeting at Harvard landed him a lectureship at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada. A professor from 1965, he stayed on staff there until retirement in 1989.

But this date-mongering does not tell us the life of this remarkable man. Nor do his extensive publications. Nor do they tell us how he was amongst the first to warn of the dangers of habitat fragmentation in the Australian landscape; or the importance of the book he promoted and edited - *Birds of Eucalypt Forests and Woodlands: Ecology, Conservation, Management* (1985) – still a valuable resource tool for the management of Australian forests; or how he was amongst the first to take bird research out of the dusty halls of the museum, and integrate detailed field study with wider ecological analysis; or how he took Ernst Mayr's evolutionary ideas and wrote of the origins of Australian birds and their adaptations to our unique landscapes. His good humour and kindly nature shine clearly through in his autobiographical notes.<sup>0</sup>

Australian recognition came by way of the award of the D.L. Serventy Medal in 1995. He is also remembered for the endowments he set up to support bird research in both Canada and Australia. He was a long term member of the Australian Bird Study Association, and an enthusiastic supporter.

Allen Keast never married, and is survived by his sister, Janet Baker.

The members of the Australian Bird Study Association send their sincere condolences to his family.

Stein Boddington