

Obituary

Dr Stephen Davies (1935 – 2020)

Scientist, expert on birdlife



Dr Stephen Davies died in October 2020. He was a member of the Australian Bird Study Association and an outstanding contributor to Australian ornithology. We reprint below an obituary largely based on one written by Patrick Cornish and published in *The West Australian* in November 2020. We thank *The West Australian* and the author for facilitating our acknowledgement of Stephen's immensely valuable contribution to our understanding of Australian birds in this way.

Wading waist deep in a swamp, Stephen Davies was in his element. As a scientist, he was always one for the field rather than the desk. Getting soaked while helping a postgraduate student inspect her ducks, for example, came with the sometimes messy territory. As an academic, he ensured that students followed the practical path. They could read books and write reports, yes, but must also appreciate fauna in the wild, no matter how difficult to track.

Three Perth universities, Murdoch, Curtin and the University of WA, were among those to benefit from his intellectual nourishment.

Royalty were encouraged in the same way. As director of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (now called Birdlife Australia), Davies was proud to show the Prince of Wales and Princess Diana the observatory on Rotamah Island on Victoria's Gippsland coast during their visit to the State in 1985. The host was instrumental in establishing observatories around Australia during his time as head of RAOU. Prince Charles' father, the Duke of Edinburgh, and Sir David Attenborough were among the notables to have sought his opinions on avian matters.

Considerably taller than average, his hair and eyebrows seemed to have been tossed by a tug of war between a pair of ospreys. Here was an enthusiast who steered his own course through life. As guest at Mileura sheep and cattle station, in the Murchison, he built a bough shed to sleep in, and conducted discussions for students next to a stone hut. Emus, parrots, bats and termites were the province for a man for whom "no job was too small". Fireside-and-fun chats were accompanied by lashings of the stew he had famously learnt to concoct while an army cook on national service.

Yet no colleague, student or simple bird lover should ever have been fooled by superficial appearance. He did not become director of the CSIRO wildlife division in WA, from 1969 to 1983, merely by looking the part. That leadership role was down to an uncommon blend of brainpower and people skills. His name, either as editor or author, is on the cover of books including *The Atlas of Australian Birds*, and the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds*. The latter won a Royal Zoological Society of NSW Whitley Medal. The title of another of his books, *Ratites and Tinamous*, may have had even some bird specialists reaching for information sources. Emus and ostriches, as well as the nocturnal kiwi in New Zealand, are ratites; tinamous, found in Central and South America, are also relatives.

Elizabeth, the eldest of four daughters of Dr Davies and his wife, Wendy, used her eulogy at the memorial service to mention his modesty as well as his expertise: "Dad never expected recognition for any of his work, he did it because he wanted to know and could see the benefits to many. He did quietly accumulate many accolades, an honorary doctorate of science from Cambridge University in 1988, adjunct professorships at Murdoch and Curtin, a fellowship from Birdlife Australia, an entry in *Who's Who*, and a finalist for senior Australian of the year."

He had come a long way from his first home on Thursday Island, off Queensland's northern tip. Stephen John James Frank Davies was born in Sydney on 26 April 1935, only child of Edith (nee Cronin, known as Joan) and Stephen Davies, bishop of Carpentaria, which covered north Queensland, the whole Northern Territory and all land within Torres Strait, including Thursday Island, site of the diocesan cathedral. Their son's three middle names honoured both grandfathers and an uncle. When the island came under threat of attack during World War II, Stephen and his mother moved to Sydney, home of her parents. He boarded at The King's School, Parramatta, which in 1952 awarded him a scholarship to Cambridge.

Returning to Australia after completing an honours degree in zoology in 1956, he worked for the CSIRO. The organisation gave him another scholarship to return to Cambridge for his PhD degree. This second stay was the launch pad for not only his career but also marriage to Wendy Adams, who had studied biology at Cambridge.

Dr Davies was hardly the sort to retire. He was a keen pastoral assistant and lay reader for the Anglican parish of Mundaring. Calls came from students and other seekers of advice. At home in Mt Helena in WA, gangs of honking magpie geese interrupted attention to Radio National. His flocks of Shropshire sheep were exhibited at the Perth Royal Show for 50 years. *My Fair Lady* was, appropriately, his favourite musical, given that it features an entertaining professor advocating precision.

He died in Perth on the 29th October 2020, survived by Wendy, their daughters, Elizabeth Read, Marion Seymour, Frances Davies and Sarah Wiese, 10 grandchildren and one great-granddaughter. His monumental legacy includes the *Atlas of Australian Birds*, now known as *Birdata*. Birdlife Australia's website valedictory praises the Davies "optimism and capability (for) the atlas taking its first running steps towards flight".