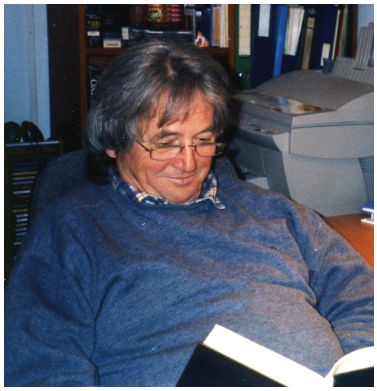
Obituary

Ken Rogers (1939-2021)



My father, Ken Rogers, died in his sleep on 18th February 2021. He was 81 and over the past 40 years he had made a substantial contribution to Australian ornithology and shorebird studies. His wife Annie (a companion on many of his birding projects) had died a year previously.

Dad was born in the UK, two months after the death of his father. A scholarship from the Bank Clerks' Orphanage fund permitted his mother to send him to Seaford College boarding school. Gifted at mathematics, he won a university scholarship from the Atomic Energy Authority, and graduated from Kings College (London University) with a first class honours in physics. He worked briefly as an atomic physicist (and learned to program computers in that time), but academia did not appeal to him. He found his preferred professional niche in a discipline that was then called "operational research", turning his mathematical talents to solving everyday problems e.g. statistical models to find the cheapest way to move freight and how many bus stops to have on a bus route. My father remained in operational research and statistics thereafter, modelling transport problems in the first half of his career, and costing insurance in the last half. He enjoyed it and did it well, but he did not take his work home with him. His job was a way to make a living so that he could spend lots of time with his family and on his many other interests.

Foremost among these interests was ornithology. In the 1960s he started birdwatching to pass the time when the weather was bad for rock climbing. The interest increased when I (at the age of 4) became his first birding companion, and it became a serious interest when he secured a job with the United Nations in Iran, moving there with his young family in 1973. For the first time he met some real birdwatchers, notably Derek Scott and Francis Argyle, who worked for the Iranian Department of Environment. They became good friends, and our family often joined them on bird surveys and ringing expeditions, camping in many remote parts of Iran. Dad became a licenced bird bander, mist-netting migrant passerines in the Alborz mountains and waders in the marshes south of Tehran. Some interesting people passed through the banding sites in those days. One was Clive Minton, later to become a big part of our lives in Australia. Another was Kate Lessels, who showed Dad some data she had collected for Greater Flamingos; she was trying to work out if they could be sexed on tarsus length. Dad realised that some of the statistical methods he had used at work could solve the problem, analysed the data to illustrate the approach, and wrote a short report about what he had done. It was all done by hand in those days, but as his handwriting was messy, he got a secretary at work to type it up. There was a misunderstanding and it was typed up as an official United Nations Report, so my father accidentally had his first ornithological publication! More importantly, he realised that with his analytical skills he could make a scientific contribution to ornithology, rather than just collecting data.

The 1978 revolution forced the family to leave Iran, and we emigrated to Melbourne in 1980. Dad immediately resumed contact with Clive Minton, with the inevitable result that he and the family became regular participants in the shorebird banding program of the Victorian Wader Study Group. Passerine banding was a still bigger focus for Dad in the 1980s and early 1990s. Having realised there was no Australian "Svensson" to help Australian bird banders, he started a passerine banding project in 1982, marked by an emphasis on safe banding practice and careful attention to data collection. Most weekends found him in the field (along with his family and an informal group of other birders), collecting data for a guide to ageing and sexing bush birds. It resulted in a book, *Banders Aid* (1986), a supplement (1990), and substantial contributions to the sections on Plumages and Related Matters in the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*.

Through the 1990s and early 2000s, Dad started to spend more time analysing bird data and writing papers. He enjoyed analysis, and felt it was the most useful contribution he could make to ornithology. Shorebird enthusiast Mark Barter probably encouraged that mindset more than anyone; he was very keen to share shorebird data and get it published, so that it could be used for conservation outcomes. Dad brought his statistical skills to the Australasian shorebird scene at a time when shorebirds were not a focus of Australian academia. Analysing and publishing the already enormous datasets for shorebirds fell on the shoulders of amateurs, and it was a serious challenge in those days. Dad's ability to conceive and carry out rigorous analyses made a huge difference.

My father was especially strong on analysis of biometrics and moult data, developing a highly effective software package (SHEBA) to analyse bird measurements. He became an excellent demographer, carrying out the first survival analyses published by Theunis Piersma's lab in the Netherlands – a precursor to the establishment of the Global Flyways Network, now a leading centre in shorebird demography studies. After he retired he edited *Stilt*, the journal of the Australasian Wader Studies Group (AWSG). His period at the helm culminated in *Stilt 50*, a bumper edition (325 pages) which provided a broad (and sobering) overview of shorebird status throughout the flyway. It is still a very useful publication, and it played a role in the increasing emphasis on international shorebird conservation by the AWSG.

Over the years Dad published at least 50 ornithological papers, and made still greater contributions behind the scenes. With his erudition, approachability, sense of humour and enthusiasm, he was a pleasure to work with – and much or most of his birding time was spent helping others, as a banding trainer, reviewer, editor, friend and father. Brett Lane summarised his character succinctly: "What a brilliant thinker, generous mentor and barrel of fun Ken was". He is survived by his son Danny and daughter Maryam.

Danny Rogers