

## Obituary—

### *Ken Simpson 1938–2014*

Kenneth Nigel Graham (Ken) Simpson, the ornithologist, educator and writer, passed away on 9 July 2014. He was born in Sydney, but moved to Melbourne whilst he was still quite young. Ken's secondary education at University High School was followed by tertiary study at the University of Melbourne and the Australian National University. Thereafter, Ken worked as a research technician for several educational and research institutions in Melbourne and elsewhere, including the Austin Hospital at Heidelberg, the School of Geology at Melbourne University, the Department of Zoology at Monash University, the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research and the National Museum of Victoria.

Although Ken acquired a formidable knowledge of vertebrate palaeontology through his work at Melbourne and Monash Universities and the National Museum, his real passion from childhood was birds. He was able to indulge this professionally as a member of a CSIRO scientific expedition to Macquarie Island in 1965–1966, on which his responsibilities included studying and photographing albatrosses and penguins. In 1972, the interest in seabirds fostered by the Macquarie Island experience led to the publication of his first book, *Birds in Bass Strait*. This publication was followed in 1984 by the hugely successful *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*, co-authored with the talented bird artist, Nicolas Day. This work rapidly became one of the top field guides to Australian birds, went through eight revisions and sold a phenomenal number of copies. Part of the secret of its success was that Ken skilfully drew on the recruited expertise of an impressive list of professional and amateur ornithologists as original contributors, but it was his ability to meld it all together into an accurate, rigorous, attractive and reliable identification resource that was paramount. More recently, with his partner Zoe Wilson, Ken wrote *Birdwatching in Australia and New Zealand*, a 'birding' book designed more for beginners. During an incredibly busy life, Ken also found time to publish a large number of short articles on natural history in peer-reviewed and other journals.

The other main strand to Ken's passion for natural history was that he loved to share it; he loved to talk about natural history and educate and make people enthusiastic about it. He got the opportunity to do this in a professional capacity, after the awarding of an honorary MSc from Monash University led to a lectureship in geology, ecology and practical environmental science at Deakin University, where he lectured mainly to teachers. But Ken also 'spread the message' more widely, because he spent a huge amount of his own time addressing ornithology, natural history and conservation groups throughout Victoria, both in their meeting places and in the field. In 1996, he was recognised for the enormous contribution that his writings, lectures, education courses and field tours had made to Australian natural history by being awarded the Australian Natural History Medallion.

Many readers of *AFO* will know that Ken also did an outstanding job as the

honorary editor of *The Australian Bird Watcher* from 1977 to 1981 and then acted as sub-editor responsible for papers on rare birds in *The Australian Bird Watcher/Australian Field Ornithology* from 2000 to 2005. Ken was also president of Bird Observation and Conservation Australia (BOCA, which has now merged with Birds Australia to form BirdLife Australia) from 1996 to 1999. In this role, he staunchly supported the traditional activities of the club, but also made it much more education- and conservation-orientated, and more scientific in its approach to ornithology. He was most fittingly awarded a Life Membership of BOCA in recognition of his lifelong service to the club.

This is a very incomplete account of a crowded life. Ken Simpson will be remembered fondly by his many ornithological colleagues and friends. His outstanding skills, infectious enthusiasm, kindness, frightening capacity for hard work and lovely sense of humour are already greatly missed. On a personal note: thank you, Ken, for welcoming me to Australian ornithology and teaching me that even competent field ornithologists can have accidents when examining European blackbirds' eggs!

**Alan Lill**

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