

ROBERT PORTER ALLEN

1905–1963

Photograph taken in Florida Bay in 1958.

IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT PORTER ALLEN

ALEXANDER SPRUNT, IV

THE rare and endangered birds of North America lost one of their most able and vocal advocates when Robert P. Allen died at his home in Tavernier, Florida on June 28, 1963.

In an age when molecular biology is believed, by some, to be the ultimate science, Bob Allen was the epitome of the field biologist. Deeply concerned with all living things, human as well as avian, Bob was an ecologist in the best sense of the word but was actually much more than that. He believed that in order to help an endangered species you must first know as much about it as possible, and then having gained this knowledge, you must *do something* about it. He was a conservation activist. He literally gave his life for his beliefs and his birds.

It was my rare privilege to have known Bob over a span of 25 years and to have worked closely with him during the latter years of his long association with the National Audubon Society.

Bob Allen was born in South Williamsport, Lycoming County, Pennsylvania on April 24, 1905. His parents were of Welsh and English stock, his father a lawyer and his mother a former schoolteacher. They were both strongly conscious of the social and political aspects of the world and brought up their children in an atmosphere where devotion to a cause was taken as a matter of course. Bob's mother must have been a remarkable person. She was a devoted Democrat and an active unionist and her liberal attitudes found fertile soil in the heart of her son, Robert. Bob remained a fiercely liberal Democrat throughout his life. This total dedication to an idea or a cause was one of Bob's most vital characteristics. Once convinced of the rightness of his cause, he held to it with the directness and determination that marked his endeavors throughout his life.

Bob's interest in the outdoors came easily in western Pennsylvania. During his boyhood game was still plentiful in the surrounding hills and he and his brother, John, spent most of their free hours tramping the ridges and hollows of Bald Eagle Mountain. Like so many of his generation (and mine) he early fell under the spell of that master of woodcraft, Ernest Thompson Seton. When Bob was 10 he first read Seton's "Two Little Savages" and became a Seton Indian literally for life.

There were other influences. A biology teacher enrolled young Bob in a Junior Audubon Club where he heard lectures by Arthur A. Allen and Louis Agassiz Fuertes, which led to correspondence with Frank Chapman and T. Gilbert Pearson. The foundation for his career was already being laid and turned his outdoor pursuits from deer slaying to bird watching. That the lessons were effective can be seen in the purchase of his first pair

of binoculars on his 16th birthday with his first paycheck as a member of the National Guard.

After high school Bob moved on to Lafayette College for two years but the atmosphere and the restraints of life at Lafayette did not suit his restless spirit. In his own words he "remained an undisciplined nonconformist, incapable of learning many of the graces and determined to find a way of life wherein the kind of shoes you wore and the sort of knot in your tie were of no importance whatever." In the autumn of 1925, after correspondence with Louis Fuertes, Bob transferred to Cornell. Unexpected reverses at home, including the death of his father, forced him to drop out of Cornell only three months later. He never went back.

At this period, Bob deviated from the mainstream of his life and indulged the wanderlust that really was never very far below the surface. He went to sea and spent three years knocking around the seaports of the world, even experiencing a shipwreck in the Sulu Sea. Bob has not left much of a record of these years but anyone who knew him is convinced that they were eventful and undoubtedly varied. He arrived back in New York with 48 cents in his pocket and considerable "more knowledge of the world beyond Bald Eagle Mountain."

A few months later an event took place that profoundly influenced Bob's outlook and the plans he had made for his life—he went to a party and met a girl. She was Evelyn Sedgwick, a graduate of Julliard who was preparing for a career as a concert pianist. That night both of their lives changed. "We seemed to have things to say that the other wanted very much to hear." Bob and Evelyn were both finding these things and still talking about them for the next 33 years.

This chance encounter with a lady led Bob to give up the sea and to search for a congenial occupation that would allow a more normal home life. He went to see his old correspondent, Frank Chapman, at the American Museum. These were the early days of the great depression, and Dr. Chapman could only offer a voluntary position that afforded no remuneration but suggested that young Allen go and talk to Dr. Pearson who was then head of the National Audubon Society. This was the final move that started Bob down the path he was to follow.

Dr. Pearson must have liked what he saw when Bob called on him, because the upshot was a job on the very meager staff of the Audubon Society. The task he was given was the cataloging of the considerable library that Dr. Pearson had built up over the years. I do not know whether it dates from this period, but Bob had a love of books and a facility for gathering facts from library sources which stood him in good stead in later years.

Bob was never at his best between four walls, and Dr. Pearson must

have recognized other talents in his young employee. Early in 1931 he sent Allen out into the field, first to report on conditions in heron colonies in North and South Carolina and then to do a survey of breeding birds on the coast of Maine. The latter resulted in the discovery of the first known nesting of the Great Black-backed Gull in the United States. After this Allen spent more of his time in the field, although he was still librarian for the Society.

The fall of 1932 found Bob at Cape May, New Jersey working with a State Game Warden to reduce the illegal kill of birds of prey. Incidental to this primary task, Allen collected specimens and made numerous food habits determinations. Later he and Roger T. Peterson collaborated on an article concerning the hawk migration at Cape May which appeared in *The Auk* (1936: 393-404).

In 1934 Allen was taken out of the library and named Director of Sanctuaries following Ernest G. Holt whom he had assisted for some time. This placed Bob in charge of some 25 wardens spread around the country from Maine to Texas. It is amusing to note that the Audubon Board of Directors thought Bob looked too young for so responsible a position but when he grew a moustache this seemed to remedy the situation.

Not long after this, in early 1935, Dr. Pearson retired and John H. Baker took over the reins of the Society. With this change in administration a shift toward more field work was evident and the staff of Audubon was enlarged. My father, Alexander Sprunt, Jr., joined the Sanctuary Department as Supervisor of Southern Sanctuaries and, although I was a small boy at the time, my association with Bob Allen began.

In the spring of 1936 while still Sanctuary Director, Allen began with Frederick P. Mengels a study of a colony of Black-crowned Night Herons in Nassau County, New York, that continued for three breeding seasons. It involved rising at 4:00 AM, bicycling to the colony, making his observations, returning home, catching the train, and arriving for work only one hour late! These studies awakened his interest in bird behavior and laid the foundation for much of his later work.

In 1939 John Baker proposed that a study should be made of the Roseate Spoonbill similar to those on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and the California Condor which the Society had already sponsored. Bob Allen gave up his position with the Sanctuary Department to undertake the spoonbill investigation. In October of that year Bob, his wife, and their two small children left their home on Long Island and moved, bag and baggage, to the small town of Tavernier on Key Largo. Although close to the tiny colony of spoonbills, this was still too far for Bob, and he set up a tent camp on Bottle Key in Florida Bay and moved right in with the birds. This was typical of Allen's way of doing things. He was a tire-

less worker, at his best out in the mangroves, up to his knees in marl, watching the birds at close range or analyzing the environment, immersing himself, literally at times, in the world of the spoonbill. Bob was an outdoorsman par excellence. He knew all the skills of camping, field cookery, boating, and generally getting along in the bush, while still doing an excellent job of research, talents that are all too rare today. His painstaking study of the spoonbill in Florida and Texas was published as National Audubon Society Research Report No. 2 in 1942.

When World War II burst upon the United States in late 1941, Allen characteristically volunteered at once for service in the Army. Bob was a rugged man, but basic training at age 37 is no joke. Just the same he came through with flying colors and went to sea again in the Army's Navy as mate on a mine planter. He remained in this berth throughout the war and was mustered out in early 1946.

In the early 1940's conservationists and ornithologists suddenly became alarmed at the extremely low numbers of the Whooping Crane. The only agency able to mount an investigation into the status and biology of the species was the National Audubon Society. The Society entered into an agreement with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Cooperative Whooping Crane Project was begun in 1945. With World War II still going on, the efforts on behalf of the whooper did not get into high gear for some time, although preliminary investigations were carried on by Fred Bard of the Saskatchewan Museum, Olin Sewall Pettingill, and others. After his release from the Army in the fall of 1946, Bob Allen was assigned to the Cooperative Whooping Crane Project. This started what was undoubtedly the most eventful and fruitful period of his life.

That October Bob and his family left Florida for the Aransas Refuge on the coast of Texas and settled in the small town of Austwell just off the refuge. The Allen family were peculiarly well suited to be ambassadors of the Whooping Crane. One of Bob's most valuable talents was his ability to relate to people of all kinds and conditions and, through his dynamic personality and his obvious devotion to the birds, to arouse their interest and sympathy. He could go into a community that cared nothing for wildlife, were even hostile toward it, and in a short time turn the whole place into boosters of his project. In this he was greatly helped by Evelyn, who kept up with her music and has taught people all over the country to play the piano and the organ.

The Whooping Crane was a difficult species to study, hard to approach, and wild in every sense. Allen wrote of his first contact with the cranes, "I remember that those first two birds seemed very far away— $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ mi. distant—but not only in a physical sense. Their arrogant bearing, the trim of their sails, as it were, would intimidate the most brash investigator.

I reached our cabin that first night feeling very humble and not too happy. And that . . . is a very good way to begin." Begin he did, and he spent the next three years in almost constant field work that took him from Texas up the cranes' migration route to Nebraska, on into Saskatchewan, and beyond into the arctic in search of the elusive nesting ground of the whoopers. Hardship and frustration were often his companions during this period, especially during the difficult and fruitless air searches over northern Canada. Once he and his pilot were forced to land in a cove of Great Bear Lake and spend 16 hours up to their shoulders in icy water holding the plane, their only means of transportation, off the rocks. But the job was done and the study that finally appeared as Research Report No. 3 of the National Audubon Society in 1952 could well serve as a model of thoroughness and attention to detail.

Allen did not forget the Whooping Cranes in the years that followed. He was the staunchest supporter of the wild flocks and many times led the fight to protect their entity as a wild population. Their increased numbers today are in a large measure a result of his single-minded devotion to their cause.

Even before the publication of the Whooping Crane report, Allen was starting on his next project, the American Flamingo. The war years had been difficult ones for this species and the famous colonies on Andros, first described by Frank Chapman, had disappeared. Allen threw himself into this new project with his usual fervor, visiting the known range of the flamingo throughout the Caribbean from Yucatan to Bonaire. This project occupied the years between 1950 and 1956, interrupted only by the long delayed discovery of the Whooping Crane nesting ground in 1954. Bob led an expedition into the northern part of Wood Buffalo Park to study their nesting grounds at firsthand during the summer of 1955. It was an incredibly difficult journey. He often told me that it was by far the worst of his life.

Allen never actually finished with the flamingo project. Right up to the time of his death he was active in the continuing program that has provided protection for the species in its three major breeding areas.

The final years of his work with the National Audubon Society were taken up with a general survey of the large wading birds and in laying the groundwork for what he hoped would be a continuing program of investigation on this group of birds. He retired from active service with the Society on June 30, 1960.

Aside from his scientific discoveries and writings, perhaps Allen's greatest contribution was in the field of popularization of conservation through his nontechnical publications. He wrote with an easy, readable style that enabled him to project his ideas and personality convincingly through the

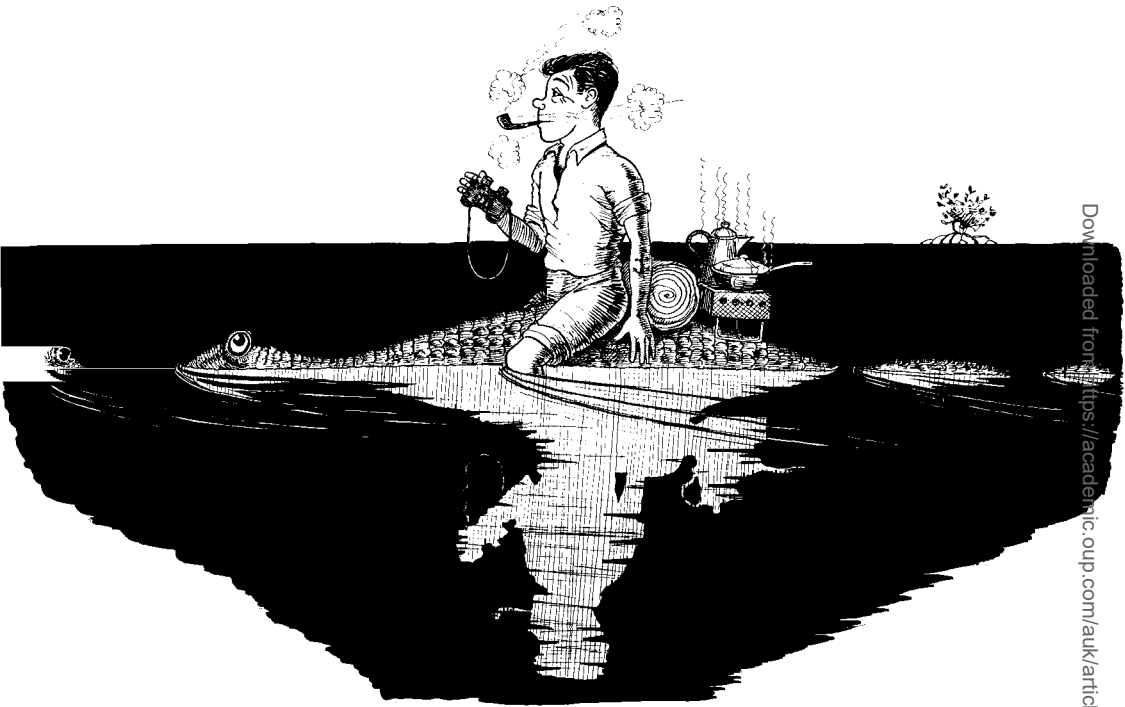
printed word, no small feat. He authored several popular books based on his experiences. The first of these, "Flame Birds," appeared in 1947 and contained an account of his spoonbill work. Perhaps his best work was "On the Trail of Vanishing Birds" covering his Whooping Crane and flamingo years which appeared in 1957. This received recognition by the *Saturday Review* as the best nature writing of that year. Later he wrote the text of "Birds of the Caribbean," published in 1961, and was working on a monumental "Birds of North America" for the Golden Press at the time of his death. He was also a frequent contributor to magazines. *Bird Lore*, later *Audubon Magazine*, carried many articles under his byline. *National Geographic* and several others published his work. He was also an avid reader of and a frequent contributor to *Blackwoods Magazine*, published in England.

Along with his talent for writing, Bob was a competent artist and he enlivened his articles with his drawings of birds, animals, and fish. He was a very clever cartoonist as well and turned out many a humorous sketch. Many of his sketches of personalities he met with during his travels have never been published. Bob always wanted to paint and planned to spend some of his retirement pursuing this wish, but time and the press of other things never allowed it.

Never one to seek the limelight, Bob did not expect recognition or honors for his work. As he expressed it, "All I want is an answer to my questions." Awards came to him, however, and no one was more deserving of them. He received a Nash Award for outstanding work in conservation. Perhaps the two that meant the most to him personally were the Brewster Memorial Award presented by the A.O.U. in 1957 for his life history studies and the John Burroughs Award in 1958 for his book on vanishing birds. Bob was one of only three persons who received both these awards. On his retirement in 1960, he received a citation from the National Audubon Society. A posthumous honor that I consider particularly fitting came to him in 1964 when the National Park Service named three keys in Florida Bay the Bob Allen Keys. Few persons have seen more of North America than he did, but of all the areas that he visited and worked in I believe that Florida Bay held first place in his heart.

Allen was, by emphatic choice, never a "joiner," but was active in several organizations. The A.O.U. was perhaps first among these. He became an Associate in 1933, was elected a Member in 1944, and a Fellow in 1955. He was also associated with the Wilson Ornithological Society, the Linnean Society, and the National and Tropical Audubon Societies.

Bob was a man of many parts. In spite of his passionate devotion to the cause of conservation and to "his" birds, he was far from being an ascetic. He loved to relax and enjoy himself and could do so anywhere



THE CRUISE OF THE "CROC"

Hitherto unpublished self-caricature by Bob Allen, Florida, circa 1940-1941.

whether in company of the world's great and learned or reading "Bab Ballads" aloud to native Bahamian wardens in a tent camp in the bush. He loved parties but only in the company of old and congenial friends. Cocktail parties full of strangers and small talk were things to be avoided if at all possible.

One of the things that he shared with his wife was a passion for music, though their tastes differed sharply. Long an ardent Gilbert & Sullivan buff, Bob was also a jazz fan, and if missed from a gathering in New York could usually be found at the "Metropole" in Times Square listening to the latest bands. Bob used to say that jazz improvisation was the greatest expression of the musician's art, an opinion *not* shared by Evelyn!

Along with his love of music was a great appreciation of literature and poetry. He was an avid reader and was fond of reading or reciting passages aloud. One of the most enjoyable evenings I was ever privileged to spend took place in the home of Herbert McKinney in Nassau. Mr. McKinney, L. E. W. Forsythe, long Commissioner of Andros, and Bob

joined in recitations from Kipling, the Rubaiyat, and others of like vein.

Bob was not averse to writing a bit of doggerel himself at times:

“I don’t wish to be didactic,
But there’s something enigmatic,
In the game the Pink Bird plays with time.
So I’ve cast my lot with his’n,
In this mangrove-studded prison,
And I’m looking for the reason and the rhyme.”

Those of us who are still “looking for the reason and the rhyme” have lost a vivid personality, an inspiring mind, and, above all, a valued friend. He is sorely missed.

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