



Gill Memorial Medal – 29 May 2021 Citation for David George Allan

Although David Allan is an accomplished academic ornithologist and an avid and enormously experienced birdwatcher, he has always favoured application over theory and active and effective conservation over the simple generation and analysis of data. For over 40 years David has brought his unique blend of pragmatism, sincerity and deep knowledge to bear in furthering our understanding of the region's birds, and in highlighting and mitigating the threats they face. The scale of his contribution to date may come as a surprise to some, simply because he has tended to operate outside of the limelight, quietly and methodically identifying and addressing priority issues and selflessly helping others to do the same. His is one of only a handful of names that lace the contemporary annals of local ornithology, likely to come up as an author or instigator in any assessment of work done over the last 3-4 decades, regardless of the taxon or aspect of avian biology under review.



Born in Nakuru, Kenya, in 1958, David's family moved to Johannesburg when he was nine years old. His tertiary education began with a BA in law, obtained at Wits in 1981. In retrospect, his interest in the law could explain the ruthless attention to detail, rigorous regard for process and tireless work ethic that have all been trademarks of his career in birds. Before finishing his BA, he spent a year working as a Nature Conservation Officer with what was then the Transvaal Provincial Administration (TPA). He resumed this work immediately after graduating, and his full commitment to a life in biology became apparent when he studied part-time to obtain a first class Honours Degree in Zoology from Wits in 1985. He was promoted to Nature Conservation Scientist with TPA in that same year. For much of the time he spent working for TPA he assisted and then collaborated with his mentor, Warwick Tarboton, on a variety of what subsequently became bench-mark bird

studies – for example, a survey of the raptor populations of what was then the Transvaal, annual monitoring of Cape Vulture colonies in the Transvaal, and surveying Wattled, Blue and Grey-crowned cranes at highveld wetlands in the grassland biome of what is now Mpumalanga. He also pursued various other studies more independently – describing aspects of the distribution, breeding behaviour and ecology of Southern Bald Ibis in the Transvaal, coordinating a national count of White Storks visiting South Africa as part of a global census of numbers, detailing the breeding ecology and conservation status of Rudd’s Lark, unravelling the interactions of three species of sparrowhawk nesting in stands of alien trees in the Hekpoort Valley, and coordinating the first national survey of Blue Swallows.

In 1987, David relocated to Cape Town, taking up a position as a Research Officer at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town (the Fitz at UCT). He also started as a part-time MSc student at the Fitz (under the supervision of the late Phil Hockey), focused on using road transect methods to count Ludwig’s Bustard in the Karoo. Over time, this project was expanded to include other large terrestrial birds, and was eventually more to do with the rapidly growing population of Blue Crane resident in the wheat fields of the Overberg than with numbers of Ludwig’s Bustard. David shifted from the Fitz to what was then the Avian Demography Unit (ADU) at UCT in 1990. He obtained his MSc with distinction in 1994, while playing an increasingly significant role in the Southern African Bird Atlas Project – one of the largest and most ambitious citizen science initiatives of its time. In 1996, David moved to Durban and took up a position as the Curator of Birds at the Durban Natural Science Museum. He has remained in this position since.



Aside from the day-to-day aspects of his job at the museum, David has managed to continue with a variety of research interests, including a long-term study of the birdlife of Durban Bay and he has led over 100 pelagic seabird day-trips off the coast of KZN. He has also expanded his involvement in bird impact studies, injecting much-needed knowledge, experience and high ethical standards into this contentious field, including important work done on all phases of the Lesotho Highlands Water Scheme, carefully documenting the avifauna affected in the areas targeted by this controversial set of developments, and wherever possible reducing the impacts of the completed phases on threatened birdlife.

Thus far, in a career that is hopefully far from over, David has been an author of several books and has published >400 popular and semi-popular articles on southern African birds, and >200 scientific papers, about 70 of which are in peer-reviewed journals. Species accounts for bird handbooks have

been a hallmark of his publication interests, including for the two-volume *The Atlas of Southern African Birds*, *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa* and the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. He is a regular contributor to *African Birdlife*, the semi-popular magazine of BirdLife South Africa and produced a regular column for the magazine over a five-year period. He has been an editor of several journals and newsletters including the *Durban Natural Science Museum Novitates*, *GABAR/Journal of African Raptor Biology* and *KZN Birds* the newsletter of the KZN bird clubs. He is one of three editors of the recently launched online journal *Afrotropical Bird Biology*. He has attended >70 scientific workshops or conferences on birds and delivered oral or poster presentations at the majority of these. He holds or has held >40 honorary positions associated with ornithology or bird conservation in Africa, and has served lengthy stints on BirdLife South Africa's National Rarities and List committees. He has completed nearly 90 specialist avian impact studies – many of them for industrial-scale developments with potentially significant impacts on birds.

BirdLife South Africa's recent reviews of the status of the region's birds draw attention to critical taxa that should be prioritized in research and conservation efforts going forward. Scratch below the surface of our current knowledge of these birds and their plight, and in most cases you will find seminal work either spearheaded by David Allan or on which he was a collaborator – the impacts of mining, afforestation and agriculture on highveld grassland birds, the impacts of poisoning and energy development on vultures and eagles, the impacts of environmental change and energy development on large terrestrial birds, the effects of infrastructure development on coastal and waterbird populations... He is also an acknowledged expert on a wide range of the country's most threatened birds – Cape and Bearded vultures, Blue and Wattled cranes, Ludwig's and Denham's bustards, Rudd's and Botha's larks, Southern Bald Ibis, Blue Swallow...

In addition to all of the above, David Allan has always had the enthusiasm, the time and the humility required to mentor younger ornithologists, speak to, chair or administer bird clubs (including many within the BirdLife South Africa stable), deliver courses in bird identification, lead outings and otherwise encourage and nurture a passion for birds in the general public. He is a long-time member of BirdLife South Africa, and a thoroughly deserving recipient of the Gill Memorial Medal.

