

Steven Edward Piper (1945–2009)

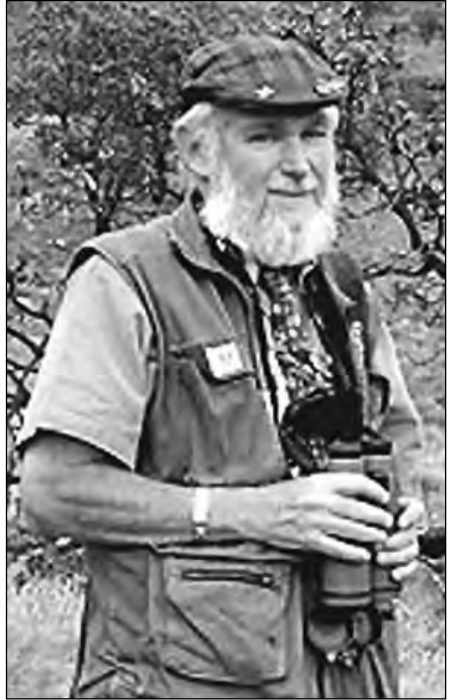
Ornithologist Dr Steven Piper, wagtail and vulture expert, was one of the most respected members of the South African ornithology community who died suddenly just weeks after celebrating his 64th birthday.

Piper was born in Durban on February 28, 1945. He went to school at Westville and Kearsney College and went on to take a B.Sc. in chemical engineering at the then University of Natal, an M.Sc. in applied statistics (awarded *cum laude*) at the University of the Witwatersrand and a Ph.D. in applied mathematics at the University of Cape Town.

Passionate about birds, he pursued his interest in ornithology, both as a pastime and later as a career.

Piper was a renaissance man in the range and diversity of his interests and talents. He held teaching posts at three universities, Natal, Wits and Cape Town, in four faculties, Engineering, Humanities, Science and Social Science, and in seven departments, Applied Mathematics, Botany, Environmental Studies, Mathematical Statistics, Psychology, Surveying and Mapping and Zoology and Entomology. He was appointed as an Associate Professor in Zoology in 1997, was promoted to full professor and retired in 2006, after an extension of his contract. He enjoyed teaching, communicating and interacting with students and took on a heavy load willingly. He taught population ecology with a strong numerical content in addition to courses in evolution and conservation biology. He supervised and co-supervised many postgraduate students in various biological fields.

Piper collected data over 25 years on the breeding biology of Long-tailed Wagtails along the Palmiet River in Westville, which illuminated the long-term demography of



Steven Piper

an African passerine in over 20 publications.

His passion for wagtails was matched or exceeded by that for Griffon Vultures, which were the subject of his doctorate at the University of Cape Town, yielding more than 50 publications. Unsurprisingly, he was asked to contribute the bulk of the vulture and wagtail species texts for the seventh edition of *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa*. He also collaborated with many scientists and wrote papers on frogs, baboons, hyrax, duiker and crabs! He also had papers on geographic information systems, remote sensing, meta-populations, political voting patterns and psycho-linguistics.

Piper worked closely with ornithologists around the globe, recently with Barn Swallow researchers in Europe, and locally at

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the Vulture Study Group, BirdLife South Africa and (KwaZulu-) Natal, the Percy FitzPatrick Institute for African ornithology at UCT and colleagues overseas.

In keeping with his love for birds, after he retired from academia Piper invested in a tourism venture that he called Pied Piper Expeditions. The company, based in Underberg, took visitors into the uplands of KwaZulu-Natal, the Drakensberg and into Lesotho via Sani Pass, Ramatseliso's Pass and Qacha's Nek to see the natural wonders of the region, its endemic and special birds, alpine flowers and San rock art.

Professors Mike Perrin and Colleen Downs of UKZN described Piper as 'unique, talented and joyously eccentric.

'He always had a smile and an anecdote. Kind, generous and well informed, he al-

ways had time for students and colleagues alike. He wore a beard, and Scottish cap, covered with many badges collected from conferences around the world, and was instantly recognised and never forgotten.

'Birds were his passion, especially vultures and wagtails, while numeracy and statistics set him apart from many ornithologists and twitchers. He was a charming gentleman and delighted delegates at conferences with wit, humour and science,' they said.

Piper's hugely-attended funeral service was held at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Westville with a subsequent remembrance service at Kenmo Lake in Himeville.

He is survived by his wife Andrea, two children and two grandchildren.

UKZN circular and *The Witness*.